

Together by TheRealSokka

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship

Language: English

Characters: Lucas S., Mike W., Will B.

Pairings: Mike W./Will B.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-01-15 14:03:22

Updated: 2018-10-16 12:58:32

Packaged: 2019-12-12 22:55:45

Rating: K+

Chapters: 8

Words: 27,719

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: "I asked. I asked if you wanted to be my friend. It was the best thing I've ever done."

1. Do You Want to be my Friend?

Credit to *MidnightEverlark* for reading the first draft of this and alerting me to some really iffy/strange bits.

Do you want to be my friend?

.....

[0]

.....

The morning of *the day* had been sunny and cloudless; the perfect start to an exciting new chapter of life. But you never know how a day will end by the way it starts, and that is especially true today. Now, a few hours later, it's still sunny, but the excitement and encouraging words of the morning have completely disappeared. Instead, there's an uncomfortable feeling Will doesn't like; that he doesn't even have a name for yet. *Loneliness* fits pretty well, though.

It's the first day of kindergarten, everyone is running around the playground, playing; and he sits somewhere in that chaos. The other children on the swing set have started a competition who can fly the highest, and the quiet boy is watching them from his seat on the fringes of the group as they try to outdo each other. He has a small stature and is very silent, so to them he is not really there; there are more exciting things to focus on at the moment. A small part of him - okay, a big part - wants to jump up, make himself look taller and join in; he knows he could win; he could fly higher than any of them. But the swing he is sitting on seems to have rooted him in place and won't let him go.

It's a windy day and he doesn't weigh much; he doesn't need to kick a lot to swing lightly. The wind is rushing in his ears, but not quite enough to drown out the clamouring children all around him. Everybody has something to say, wail, or shout about, like they are all boiling over with words that just have to get out. It is only

normal.

Will Byers has tried that, too, but it didn't work for him. Whatever he tried to say would only come out all jumbled and be greeted by strange looks that made him uncomfortable. He didn't know what he was doing wrong, but clearly something about it wasn't right. So he just swings by himself, not saying a word anymore. At least nobody takes note of him.

There must be something wrong with me.

It's not the first time that thought has crossed his mind today. Ever since the girl with the pretty blonde hair turned away from him to play with someone else, ever since his excitement of being here got stuck in his throat. Mom promised that all children are nervous on their first day; but you wouldn't know it from looking at them now, Will thinks bitterly. How does everybody already have someone else they can play with? Literally everyone does, except him. Is it just that easy? Then what is wrong with him? These questions run on repeat in his mind as the swing takes him higher and higher. Now he can see over the fence and across the fields. Only a little higher and he could fly away. Maybe back home, or even further; if he tries really hard, he could maybe even leave the entire town behind.

The thought is incredibly tempting. But he promised mom to be here when she comes to pick him up. Will sniffs a little at the memory of how proud she looked. He kicks a little harder as he tries not to think about how long it is until then.

"Hey."

Will doesn't know what makes the voice stand out. He doesn't know what makes him turn his head. It's not the assumption that the small greeting was addressed to him; of course that's not the case. More likely someone is talking to another boy on the swings. But to his surprise he is suddenly met with a pair of dark eyes who look back at him. His rhythm falters and he almost loses his balance.

The eyes belong to a solemn face, which rests on a boy who is standing beside the swings. Will's feet scrape through the sand as he slowly comes to a halt. He doesn't know the boy, but then he doesn't

know anybody. His eyes linger on the other's freckle-dusted cheeks; then on his hands, twisting and untwisting in a constant, hectic motion; before wandering back to the dark eyes that alternate between Will and the pavement. From his angle, the boy seems a lot taller than him.

A part of Will is instantly suspicious of this person who for some reason decided to talk to him. *What does he want from me?* is the first thought in his mind. But there's also a tiny corner of him that yearns too much for another friendly word like that first *Hey*; a part of him that can't manage to be afraid of these kind-looking features. A part that can't help but look at the other boy with hopeful curiosity.

The boy looks up to meet his eyes once again. If Will didn't know better, he'd think he was nervous, which is ridiculous. The boy swallows, and then he asks a question.

It's six simple words.

Will's eyes grow wide, sure he has misheard. Somehow there's a universe packed into these six words, and the sheer weight and expanse of it turns Will's own upside down. *Did he...?* Once again, his thoughts become jumbled, making it impossible to even think about a response. But his lips suddenly develop a mind of their own and refuse to stay shut: "Yes." The reply is rushed and breathless, not nearly enough to express everything that is tumbling about in his head. Will wants to disappear into the ground. He can't get anything right today.

But then it doesn't even matter, because the other boy's look of uncertainty slowly changes and turns into a tentative smile. It's crooked and lopsided, but in its simple honesty, it's like the sun has risen. Will takes it in in awe, unable to stop looking at this smile. After a few seconds, he realizes that this is probably a weird thing to do - yet again - and he quickly turns away, feeling his cheeks flush.

The boy doesn't seem to mind. If anything, his grin only becomes broader. He points at the swing next to Will: "Can I?"

Will nods hastily, scared that he could shatter this miracle that has just happened if he so much as blinks wrong. The miracle sits down

next to him, positively beaming now. He starts to swing, kicking off the ground with sports shoes that look brand new. After a second Will follows with his own hand-me-downs, remembering how his muscles work. One swing later they are of a height, side by side. And within that one moment, it suddenly doesn't feel weird or miraculous or *how did this happen?* anymore, but just another boy sharing a swing set in a little competition. The taller of the two makes a sideways glance and laughs when he sees he's flown an inch higher than Will. Not a riling laugh, but a kind one. Challenging.

There's something warm and new suddenly fluttering in Will's chest, exciting and breath-taking, that he can't put a name to. Neither does he want to; there's more important things to do. He kicks out and propels himself forward. With his light weight he easily reaches the arc of the swing, leaving his companion a few feet below him. A cheerful yell reaches his ears, and he realizes only a second later that it was his own.

He barely hears the bell tolling; only when the playground is starting to empty does Will slowly come back to the real world. The flying reaches an abrupt end as both boys come to a halt. Will casts a quick look at his - he doesn't quite dare to think it yet, even now - before running after the others, afraid of being left behind. In the tide of excited children, Will soon loses sight of him.

The river of muttering voices and moving limbs empties into a great hall, where a number of adults are standing, waiting for them. The new arrivals are shoved to the front, right into the spotlight, and Will tries his best to take up as little space as possible. It feels like everybody in the room is looking at him. A small ache settles in his tummy, almost like the time he ate too many pancakes and mom had to take him to the doctor.

A small woman steps into the circle. She looks very important; with long, sweeping clothes and piercing looks as she introduces herself, and Will is instantly intimidated. He silently prays she doesn't look at him. Something like a smile appears on that face, somehow wedging itself between the hooknose and the pair of frowning lips, and she welcomes everyone. What she says is probably supposed to be friendly, but the row of small children in the front shrink even smaller whenever her unblinking eyes pass over them. It's the first

time Will is glad for his small, inconspicuous stature, even though it doesn't really make him feel safe.

Then his nervous gaze finds the dark eyes across the circle, and he quickly holds on to them. They reflect his own nervousness right back. Perhaps that should have scared him even more, but something strange happens: somehow, seeing his *friend* - he said it! - nervous helps. It's more encouraging than all the *It's going to be all right's* and *Show them who you are's* he's gotten from mom and dad respectively.

When the headmistress dismisses them all with a curt nod, Will has heard barely half of what she said. Apparently the first day is all about getting to know each other without any actual teaching, though, which comes as a big relief. Will shudders when he thinks of whatever subject that woman teaches. After realizing they have been freed, the hall empties under an upsurge of noise, with everyone running right back outside, until only a handful of forlorn children remain, Will and the other boy included. In a sudden rush of unease, Will realizes that he doesn't even know his name

"Um, hi." he gets out, increasing his amount of spoken words to two. Small steps.

"Hey."

Will has no experience with this, but he knows they should probably be doing something, like everyone else who just stormed out the doors. How do you do this, though? Will bites his lip: the words are gone once again.

The other boy resolves it by moving first: "You want to...?" He gestures vaguely to the playground.

The freckled face looks just as unsure what to do, and paradoxically it once again relieves Will greatly. He nods eagerly. It doesn't seem to matter too much what he agreed to, he only knows he wants to.

The boy gives another radiant smile, and once again it is completely impossible not to return. Then he holds out his hand:

"Michael."

Before Will can even think twice, he's already taken it. *Friends*. There is the giddy feeling again, steadily tugging him into this strange and exciting newness, and he couldn't resist it even if he wanted to. Which is the last thing he wants now. Their fingers interlock like perfect puzzle pieces.

"William."

2. First Steps

First Steps

.....

[1]

.....

The next day, the quiet boy is on the playground again, in the exact same spot as before. Upon seeing his small figure on the swings, Mike releases the breath he had been holding and pushes through the throng of children crowding the kindergarten. Again there is an empty swing next to his friend - had he actually saved him one? Mike feels that absurdly giddy smile tug at his mouth at the thought.

"Can I?"

Eyes light up, chin dips in a nod and just like that they are flying again. It's a little annoying that William gets so much higher than him, but Mike can't bring himself to be upset about it and simply enjoys the feeling of sheer freedom. All this has already defied his expectations, but in a very good way. He always thought friendship would be hard to do, that you had to put work into it - Dad's words - but if this really is what friendship means, it is completely effortless. William is easy to be around, easy to smile with, even though he is a little quiet. But coming off the back of his annoying sister every morning, even that feels perfect.

A few minutes later, the bell rings again, and this time they stay together when everyone sweeps inside. There is another speech given by one of the adults, but thankfully the scary woman is nowhere to be seen. Then the children are divided into their classes. To both their joy, they end up in the same one - luckily those are not sorted alphabetically.

That is where the luck ends, however, as soon as their teacher walks into the room: for a start, she just takes time to introduce herself -

Megan - but then she asks the children to introduce themselves; who they are, how old they are, what they like - all in front of the class. Mike is not at all comfortable at the thought, and from the suppressed murmurs, neither is anyone else. Two boys who come first actually seem to enjoy it, hollering out their names to the others and looking absurdly proud of themselves. Most of the others choose to speak directly to the teacher, though, pretending that the 20 pairs of curious, piercing eyes aren't even there. Mike is one of the first to be called up, and finds that to be a working tactic: "Michael Wheeler. I'm six. I like hiking and- uhm- TV."

Megan nods interestedly, his signal that he can return to the safety of his seat. He gives an embarrassed grin to Will when he flops back down, but his friend doesn't seem to notice: he is sitting as stiff as a statue, completely petrified. The closer they get to the beginning of the alphabet, the faster his breathing becomes and the more nervous his hands get. Mike's chest aches and he wishes he could tell him that it's not that bad, but that is impossible without drawing everyone's attention, so he remains silent. Eventually they arrive at 'B' and the teacher calls "Last one," and Will has to walk to the front. His wide, panicked eyes flick here and there, never stopping anywhere for more than half a second. When he starts to speak, his voice comes out an octave higher than what Mike has gotten to know: "I- I'm W-ill..." The words dry up and Will is left staring into the room. He looks like he is about to bolt.

The teacher smiles encouragingly: "Hello, Will. It's ok. No reason to be nervous."

That's the wrong thing to say, Mike thinks as Will begins to stutter, and he wants to avert his eyes, thinking *that could be me*. But then Will's panicked looks find him in the back row and linger; and suddenly Mike can't just look away. His friend takes a deep breath: "William Byers." he starts again, and suddenly Mike knows he is only talking to him: "I'm f-five, and...and I like reading."

"Oh! That's nice, William. Anything else you like, maybe?"

A quick glance at Mike: "The swings."

Megan smiles: "Who doesn't? Alright Will, thanks a lot. So, now that

we know what everyone likes, how about we..."

Will sits back down next to him, his hands still shaking. When their eyes meet, the smaller boy is wearing a shaken look of pure relief: "Thanks!"

Mike has to smile. "No problem." he whispers back, even though he hasn't exactly done anything. Except listened. He doesn't know why, but somehow this feels important; as if his friend just shared a secret with him - despite at least 20 other people hearing it, too.

Friendship is strange.

After they have collected their ideas of what they want to do in class, Megan invites them to choose one of several activities to take part in afterwards, and Mike picks artistry. He has never painted or anything like that, but he chooses it because football doesn't sound like fun - even though a large part of the class seems to think so - and picture books are something he can read at home, too.

To his delight, when he enters the art room afterwards, he finds Will already sitting at a table. He scarcely notices Mike sitting down beside him, apparently too preoccupied with the pictures all over the walls and windows. Mike has to admit that they look nice and colourful, but Will gets a completely absent look on his face when he looks at them that his friend doesn't really understand. Before he can ask him, though, the teacher, a tall moustached man, enters. Mike instantly likes him; he looks kind of like his favourite uncle and has the same friendly smile. He also doesn't waste time on long introductions: "So, all you new artists. Create something for me. You can use everything you see in this room. And at the end of the lesson, the most creative work gets this delicious bar of chocolate." Everyone who hasn't really listened up to that point perks up at that sentence. "Just make whatever you want - even if it's a mess."

Chocolate turns out to be a great motivator for young artists. The obvious first choice for many is drawing, what with all the fantastic colours that are available, and soon Mike is staring down on a piece of paper, pencil poised for attack, not entirely sure what he should do next. A few minutes ago, he didn't think scribbling something on a piece of paper could be too difficult, but for some reason he can't

really come up with anything. Perhaps this wasn't the best choice of subject.

For Will, though, it clearly was. Mike quickly picks up that there's something different about his friend when he has crayons and paper before him. Will sits just a little straighter and his eyes seem just a little brighter, and he doesn't have eyes for anything but the sheet in front of him - and for Mike, occasionally. Otherwise, he completely ignores both the teacher and the other children as he scribbles away. He's not here because he hates football, but because he loves to draw, and it shows. And Mike really can't just sit here and watch him all day, can he? With new determination, he pictures their house and garden and starts to draw.

At some point while Mike is still pondering over his stick-figures-family, Will taps him lightly on the shoulder, suddenly looking very shy. Mike hasn't paid attention to what he was creating, too busy with figuring out how to make his tree not look like a lollipop, so he's not really prepared for what Will shows him: it's a sketch of his own profile, hunched over his 'art'. Mike's eyes absorb the image and he flushes as he slowly realizes that Will decided to depict him of all things. The sketch is childishly simple, the features rough, with eraser smudges all over, and it doesn't look too similar to the real Mike (at least he hopes it doesn't), but it is definitely not stick figures. For some reason, Will seems to have paid especially close attention to the cheeks and actually dotted every single one of his stupid freckles. The real counterpart has to snort when his eyes wander a little lower and he sees how well Will has captured his frown. In retaliation, and to cover his embarrassment, he promptly rolls up his own useless creation and starts chasing the giggling artist around the table, until Mr. Evans comes in to part them. The teacher tries to look scolding, but it comes across as more amused. "Now, now, boys, this is artistry, not play catch. Let me see what you've done so far..."

To nobody's surprise, a beaming Will Byers is awarded the top prize at the end of the lesson.

That afternoon, Mike comes home with half a bar of Milka-chocolate and a rolled-up picture, which he has to make an effort to hide from his sister. In the safety of his room, he once again inspects it sceptically. It's the first gift he has ever gotten from a friend, and for

that reason alone he loves it, even though he tries to play it down in his head: Why Will felt this not-so-flattering portrait was a gift he's not so sure anyway; if Nancy saw this, he'd never hear the end of it.

It ends up on his wall anyway.

3. Stories and Universes

.....

[7]

.....

"Are you okay, sweetie? You look like you've barely slept."

It's true, Will can feel his head dipping even as she speaks. That's not a problem though; anticipation more than makes up for lack of sleep. He shakes his head to clear his thoughts. The last two days felt like the longest in his life, but today is Monday again. "Couldn't sleep. Thinking." he mumbles into his cereals.

He can still feel his mom's worried eyes on him. She takes it all wrong. "Did anything happen? Someone tease you? You know you can tell me."

"Hell, woman, he's not a sodding eggshell." The boy receives a punch to the shoulder that makes him wince a little: "His age I didn't waste time on sleep either; there's more important things to do. And anyone makes fun of him; he'll show 'em. Right, son?"

Will grins: "Yes, dad." His father never specifies what he means, but he's sure he'll find something he can show.

Will decides that he loves building things. Never mind that he just discovered this a few minutes ago.

"Sand is the best thing ever invented." Mike muses as he puts the finishing touches to his tower.

Will thinks about that while he runs his fingers through the granular surface, carving out the moat for their castle. "What about snow?" he asks after a while.

It's fascinating to watch how his friend's brow furrows; Will can practically see the gears turning in there. Mike does that often, like

he's always thinking about things. "It comes second." he decides after a while. "It's so cold. Your hands get all numb."

"But that's the good part." Will contradicts. This is still new to him; at home he never argues with anyone. But to his surprise he finds that it's a lot of fun. "I love how tingly it feels. Snow is great."

"Bah." his friend shudders.

Will smiles. With Mike, it's so easy to find the right words- or, more importantly, there don't seem to be any wrong ones. Whatever he says is either greeted by a smile and a nod or a frown and a headshake; but Mike always understands what he is saying, which sets him apart from everyone else. Maybe they have an inbuilt translator for each other. Will just wonders why nobody else seems to have it.

"And a snowman lasts only a day or so." Mike adds after a while. He likes having the last word. Usually Will lets him have it too, but...

"You think this will last?" Will looks skeptically from their half-finished sand castle to all the other children running around the sandbox. He wouldn't bet on their creation still standing here tomorrow.

His friend's eyes flash with a determination that says he has accepted the challenge. "Wait a moment." To Will's surprise, he moves away from the tower he's been building and starts to dig a hole- right in the middle of what they planned would be the courtyard.

Will looks at him without understanding: "Why are you doing that?"

"I'm making a chasm, so it's like Robber's Gorge. No one can destroy Robber's Gorge. See, here is where the lightning hit one night, and it created this deep hole, right through the middle. And now the two robber groups are stuck on both sides, and they're always fighting..."

Will completely forgets about his moat as he leans in to listen. It sometimes feels like the words that the quiet boy is so often missing have all landed on Mike's side of the board, because he puts them together in such a way that they seem to come alive; a world built of

words that makes you forget everything around you. Even now Will gets lost in it- and he doesn't mind, because it's his *friend's* world and it feels so familiar and excitingly new. That probably doesn't make sense.

"Will Byers?" an adult voice calls out.

The sand castle hasn't changed much by the time Will comes back. Mike is fairly proud of his lopsided turrets, half-leaning over the chasm that separates the two castle sides, but building them alone isn't fun. He's pretty sure Birk wouldn't have had much fun either if he jumped over the abyss alone all the time.

He slowly, carefully, adds another layer to the outer wall. Building this together with his friend is an entirely different story. Will, in his quiet way, shows so much energy in whatever he does; like everything is exciting and new. Mike can feel that excitement rubbing off on him; even now when he is molding the sand by himself it still makes him smile. He doesn't want to admit how much he missed it over the two days he was stuck at home. His mother already commented that he was a lot more antsy than usual.

He looks up when Will flops down into the sand beside him. The small boy looks a little bummed out. "What was it about?" Mike asks.

"Just mom calling. She can't pick me up after class." Will shrugs, giving a half-hearted smile: "Charles said I can stay here and wait for mom while he's cleaning."

Oh. "That's shitty. So you're stuck watching him sweep the floor when everybody's gone home?" His friend doesn't look too delighted at the prospect either. Then Mike has an idea. His face lights up: "Hey, tell you what; why don't you come with us to my place? Mom won't mind."

Immediately the excitement pops up on his friend's face again, only this time it is a little held back: "Er- I mean, yeah, of course I'd like to come- but what will my mom think when I'm not here?"

"Oh, my mom can phone her or something. It's fine." Mike isn't easily

deterred. He's already thinking of showing Will around the house, showing him the new toy he got for his birthday; he has a feeling that his friend would like it too. Will has furrowed his brow in thought, gnawing at his lip, but Mike can already tell that he's going to say Yes. He is pretty sure he is grinning very stupidly at the moment, but he can't help it. It finally feels like there's someone who doesn't just pretend to care, who honestly understands his love for fantastic stories. And for that alone, possessive as it may be, he wants to spend every opportunity he has with Will. That can't be a bad thing, can it?

"Okay. If that's really alright with your mom..."

The Wheeler's house is- different. That's the best Will can describe it. Bigger, certainly, but that's not all; it has an entirely different feel to it than home. Mike's mom is smiling at him encouragingly and saying something, but Will doesn't really hear: The high ceilings make him feel very small, and everything looks so orderly and planned out. He is anxious to step anywhere, in case he isn't allowed to.

His host has no such qualms. He dodges his mother's attempt to engage Will in conversation and practically drags him along through the expansive rooms, eager to show off each and every thing worthy of attention. If the goal was to leave his friend speechless, he is successful. Will has never given much thought to their own house, but here everything seems a lot more- expensive. He doesn't know where to look first. Especially the huge television captures his attention, which causes Mike to giggle at his floored expression. Mike's parents must be millionaires, at least.

Will startles badly when a part of the furniture moves all of a sudden and becomes a man sitting on an armchair, just folding up the newspaper he was hidden behind. Amidst the rush of new impressions, Will had honestly not noticed him. The man- who has to be Mike's father- takes a moment to look Will up and down over the rim of his glasses, and the boy gets the strange feeling that he's being scanned for any irregularities. Apparently the result is positive, because after a moment he receives a smile in greeting.

"So, you're Mike's friend, I take it?"

His handshake is nowhere near as bone-crushing as dad's, and his face is a lot softer, if maybe a little dull. Mike's father actually seems nice, and Will decides he likes him. Then he remembers his manners: "Hello, Mr. Wheeler. Mike said I could come."

"Of course, yes, this house is always open to friends; that's what I always say. We keep telling him to..."

"We're upstairs, dad." Mike interrupts, dragging Will along with him, and his guest is left to wave a quick goodbye to the parents before they disappear from view.

Upstairs, Will's attention is drawn by a door plastered with an absurd amount of stickers, and he briefly stops to listen. There are echoes of upbeat music coming from within, but his friend only groans in a tone that says *don't ask*, and moves on to a much less colorful door that displays a single *Do not disturb*-sign.

When Mike opens it and they enter, Will instantly feels at home. There is one fixed, orderly point in the room- a shelf stacked with picture books and VHS- but the rest is a complete mess: Posters and books and toys that Will can't even put a name to are strewn across the floor and he has to watch out where to put his feet when he enters, carefully tip-toeing his way to the bed on the far side. His friend, ears bright red, hastily starts pushing parts of the chaos into that corner or the other, mumbling apologies. Will only grins. He didn't know what he expected, but the room looks exactly right somehow; very *Mike*.

Will doesn't question how he can think to know that when he's only known Mike for a week.

Eventually, Mike reappears from the chaos carrying a huge plastic model. Now his face is flushed with pride rather than embarrassment. He holds it up for Will to see: "Cool, huh?" His excited expression is one big *What do you think?*

„What is it?" Will asked, slightly confused.

Mike stares at him like he had just grown a second head: "What do you mean what is it?" He insistently lets the oversized plastic model

fly back and forth in front of his friend's face: "It's the Millenium Falcon. The *Millenium Falcon*!"

Will racks his brains for the information he is missing. "It looks cool?" he offers.

If the dictionary had a picture for the word 'disbelief', it would be Mike's face at this moment: "Don't tell me you don't know Star Wars!"

Oooh. Will instantly perks up. He has heard other children's breathless conversations about *Star Wars*; of course he has, and every single one of them had made it sound like the best thing ever. And it only made him more sad that he wasn't allowed to partake. "Dad doesn't like that movie." he mumbles. His father's exact words were less polite, but Will doesn't feel like repeating them.

"Doesn't li... Are you kidding me?!" Mike takes a deep breath and looks like he wants to speak his mind about that apparently abhorrent thought. Instead, he falls into a rapturous monologue why the Falcon is absolutely the best ship ever. Will listens, completely spellbound. Mike's quick-fire sentences seem to make the smuggler's ship physically present before his eyes. Will can practically see it fly through the star-spangled blackness of space, and he understands why his friend is so enraptured. Who wouldn't want to fly with something like that?

"...and it made the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs!"

Mike's audience is on the edge of his seat: "Kessel Run? What's a parsec?"

Mike frowns, momentarily stopped in his flow: "Uhm... Don't know. But it's fast, that's the point. And then he escapes those fighters like it's nothing..." He stops in the middle of his sentence. The look he gives Will is suddenly full of the trademark determination: "You have to see it. We have to watch it."

For Will it's like waking up from a very nice dream. The universe Mike has created fades away and he reluctantly disagrees: "Mike, I... dad doesn't want me to."

"Screw your dad." Will gasps at the harshness of that statement, but Mike hardly seems to notice; he has already moved on to the planning stage: "I'm going to scrape up the money. Nance still owes me a favor. You are going to see them blow that thing up, and if it's the last thing I do." When Will doesn't answer, he calms down a little. "I mean, only if you want to of course- but come on; it's *Star Wars*..."

"I'd love to!"

It bursts out of Will before he can even think about it. *Dad won't like that*, the faint voice immediately whispers in the back of his head, but it is in the clear minority right now. Something about his friend's words has left him so excited that for once he doesn't even care who thinks what.

Mike makes a little jump of joy: "Yes!"

Will giggles involuntarily at how excited his friend looks. Mike's cheeks get slightly flushed again when he notices the look. "I really want to see it again, too." he explains.

Will can't remember ever grinning so stupidly. Much less having it mirrored back at him like this. It's a nice feeling.

"Mike!" Mrs. Wheeler's voice comes from below.

"Yeah?" Mike answers, undisguised glee still in his voice.

There's a few seconds of surprised silence. Then: "You two want lunch, maybe?"

"Coming." Mike calls back, and if Will's day wasn't perfect until then, his friend's inviting smile makes it so.

For reference, the story Mike is telling comes from a Swedish children's book called "Ronja, Robber's Daughter". It's a very good read.

4. An Unexpected Journey

Welp. After like a dozen re-writes, here comes the new chapter, at last.

:

Have a good read, and let me know what you think!

.....

[532]

.....

In his dreams, Will Byers is an adventurer.

In those that he can remember, that is. And those that aren't nightmares. Which, thinking about it, aren't that many, actually. But when he does remember, it is nice to wake up with the knowledge of just having discovered a new land or a secret treasure, of having done something no one else has ever done. Those are the dreams that he wakes up from smiling. Interestingly, they tend to happen when reality is especially dull. Like now.

Will's eyes blink open to an early spring morning; half awake, half still in one very nice dream, and slowly adjust to the gloom of a bedroom. No, that's not right; he was just in a tower that climbed into the clouds, he was... what was he doing? The details of the dream are fast fading, and the boy's sleepy mind tries to hold on to them for a few seconds, but then it has to acknowledge the actual image his eyes are transmitting. That proves considerably less exciting. Outside the windows, the world is white. Large snowflakes swirl past the glass in the howling winds that rattle at the wooden beams of the house, like it wanted to tear them out one by one. That's probably what woke him. With a little grumble, Will untangles himself from the sea of blankets he had been wrapped up in and puts his feet on the floor – only to quickly draw them back. *Cold*. Of course. He fumbles for his socks, while simultaneously trying to rub

some feeling back into his toes. At least he's very much awake now.

It's not the first time this week he's woken up like this. Carefully placing his feet back on the floor, Will casts a longing look to the pair of short trousers that are gathering dust on the shelf. Only a week ago, he would have simply shrugged into those and biked to school through the warm spring sun – in theory anyway, because of course he wouldn't have seen the sun that early in the morning; but hindsight makes everything look better. Anyway. Instead, at the end of March, the winter had suddenly decided that it actually didn't want to end quite yet, and promptly set out to prove it with a snowstorm the likes of which Hawkins had never seen. That same storm is still on now, three days later, covering everything in a layer of ice and snow, and by now even Will is getting sick of all the white. Turns out snow can rapidly lose its charm when you can't even open the front door through the drifts and the heating decides to die all of a sudden, leaving the house to become an ice cube. Even now Will's breath is making clouds in the air, not helping his mood one bit. He is long past the point of changing out of his pajamas; instead every piece of clothing is simply stacked on top of each other and then augmented with a few more blankets, until what eventually emerges from the bedroom looks like a big walking fur ball.

At least the fur ball doesn't need to roll to school in this weather. At least there's that. Lately, school hasn't been fun at all. Will is kind of glad for the little break. Maybe it will be better when this mess is over.

A quick glance at the clock reveals that it's long past school time anyway. Everyone else has left the house already. Will watches as the minute hand makes its jump from 8:53 to 8:55. About twelve hours of the day left, and nothing to do. The boy sighs again and watches the clouds that it forms in the air. Heating out, no TV signal, no one around, everything ice cold. He has a change of heart; he'd almost prefer going to school. Resigning himself to his fate, Will shuffles over to the fridge.

For the majority of the week, he has practically been the only inhabitant of the house: mom and dad still brave the storm every morning to get to work – at least it's warm there – and Jonathan has started working at the RadioShack in town; something about earning

money for a new project. That leaves Will and Chester to be snowed in while everyone's gone, and the boy quickly discovered that even their patient dog could apparently grow bored with chasing throwing toys around the room. Never mind the mental state of the one doing the throwing. Before all this, having the house all to himself sounded like a good idea, but without anyone to share it with, it's really not that great.

Mike is the first who comes to mind, naturally. Will really wishes he were here. It's been four days now since he last saw him – or anyone else outside of his family. That's what the calendar says, anyway. Will doesn't really trust its judgement, because it certainly feels a lot longer. He knows he shouldn't think about that so much, as there really isn't anything he can do about it. Both the Wheeler and Byers mothers have categorically forbidden them to even leave the grounds in the blizzard. Mike, of course, had tried anyway – but Will only knew of that endeavour because they eventually got a phone call, in a voice barely recognizable as Mike's over his hoarse cold-induced rasp, telling him that *No, biking through that mess was not a good idea*. Needless to say, his mother thought so too. And that was the end of that idea.

So, after a lonely breakfast huddled under a million blankets, Will finds himself once again by his lonesome, on the quest for something to do.

Will Byers has never been much of an adventurer, outside of his dreams. That's also a fact. Certainly not like his friend, who on occasion just walks into a blizzard and sees what happens. Will wouldn't do stuff like that.

(Well, except if that same friend asked. Whatever Mike proposes, it tends to sound reasonable and great, and Will tends to go along with it – but that's beside the point.)

No, he's too careful and too shy to risk doing anything he isn't familiar with (again, exception being anything Mike suggests.) Will frowns. Why won't this head-voice not shut up? Anyway, the point is, in a quiet elementary school boy's life, not that many adventure things happen, especially not in Hawkins. Sure, once, when they felt brave, him and Mike went deep into the forest by the walled off

laboratory – mostly inspired by a parental ban to do exactly that. But that trip ended with a metal fence and curious glances at the distant building, and ultimately wasn't all that great. That was the extent of it. Will has never really thought about, or hoped of experiencing adventures like the ones he dreams of, or the ones he sometimes finds in Mike's stories. That is until that snowed in, cold morning, when he finds a book sitting on their couch.

Will almost misses it completely: it's not very remarkable with its dull grey cover and doesn't stand out much against the pillow. Jonathan must have forgotten it there, Will thinks leisurely as he picks it up. It's not a difficult guess: He has never seen dad read anything but the newspapers, and mom doesn't have time for even that most of the time. Briefly, he considers putting it back in his brother's room. Not that Jon would need it anytime soon... Eventually, out of curiosity and because he really doesn't have anything else to do, he opens it and starts to look over the first page. And has to look again. His eyes take a while to adjust to the tight, black lines of text before him; it's nothing like the colourful books full of pictures that they get to see in school. That, and there are also those strange words that pop up all over the sentences, which make it difficult to read. Will has no idea what he is looking at. But with some difficulty and determination, he manages to read the page to the end and flicks to the next. And the next. And then another.

When Jonathan comes home that evening, shaking snowflakes from the violent blizzard out of his hair, he finds his little brother still sat on the couch, eyes glued to a familiar looking book in his hands. *Huh*. Jonathan has to smile when he hangs up his coat, takes off his boots and enters the room all without Will glancing up once. He doesn't seem to notice his brother's presence at all until that brother flops down on the couch right beside him, and when he looks up then, his expression is dazed as if he just woke up from a deep dream. By the smile on his face, it must have been a good dream, though.

"Hey, buddy. You don't seem too down missing school."

Will blinks at him. Slowly, the glow in his eyes fades as he seems to be coming back to the real world. Abruptly, he turns to look at the clock. A blush spreads over his features and he quickly hands the

book back to his brother, struggling for an explanation: "You left it."

Jonathan's smile only grows broader. He gently pushes the book back to Will. "Good thing, apparently. I didn't have time to read anyways. Work was crazy." He notices how Will clutches the cover to his chest like a small treasure. *Ah*. The big brother's grin is tinged with amusement and only a little bit teasing: "So, you like 'The Hobbit'?"

The way Will's eyes light up is answer enough. And then, to Jonathan's surprise, his usually quiet brother starts babbling. Eyes wide with excitement, hands gesturing wildly, the words just come pouring out of him in an unstoppable flood; it's as if a dam has broken. He is so in raptures over the world he has discovered that he can barely finish a sentence before starting up the next one. His brother mostly nods, not daring to interrupt, even though he understands barely half of all that. What he is beginning to realize, though, is that this book won't be back on his shelf any time soon. Jonathan isn't really too sad about that. Sure, he loves Middle Earth; the Shire and the Lonely Mountain and everything in between, but the excited glimmer in Will's eyes is much better. He looks like he has just gotten the best Christmas present ever, and Jonathan is not about to take that away from him. And besides, he imagines it would be nice to talk with someone who knows what a Hobbit is. Once his little brother finally stops for breath, that is.

The snowstorm doesn't let up on Hawkins over the next few days, and if anything the house only gets colder. But that's okay, because by then Will has firmly been transported to Middle Earth, discovered Rivendell's halls and flown over the Misty Mountains on eagle's back. The brief time when his nose is not buried in the book, his mind imagines new stories and places of its own. He and Bilbo reach the Shire - and the end of their journey - by the second night, huddled under the sheets with a flashlight so that dad doesn't notice. The wind that's howling outside the windows that night doesn't even register with him; in Will's mind he is walking across sunlit fields of soft green grass, before coming to rest in a cosy hobbit hole under the hills. It's easy to fall asleep in such a place, and that night his dreams are more colourful than ever before.

And then the third day is empty. Before he even gets out of bed, the

boy opens the book again, only to remember that the last page is read, the adventure is over. But he is brimming with want for more; it can't be over! Acceptance of that fact takes its time for Will. To distract himself, he starts reading his old children's books, but the words are dull and lifeless, without the magic of the previous night. His mind brimming with the images of the journey, he eventually picks up a pen and starts drawing: A hobbit hole and one One Ring later and he only feels more miserable being stuck in his familiar bedroom.

Finally, he grabs the book and goes back to the couch to read it once more. For a few blissful hours, the world disappears and he gets to travel with Thorin's colourful company once more. This time, Will cries tears when the brave dwarf dies; and even more when Bilbo returns to Bag End. And when, on the last page, the Hobbit writes about the sudden want to see more of the world, he knows exactly what he is talking about. Could it be that there are places like this beyond Hawkins? He is halfway through planning his journey to find out, before he remembers that he is eight years old, the smallest kid in his class, and really too cautious/shy to even start something like this. And, which is what really discourages him: he doesn't have a company of people who would come with him. Jonathan, maybe... Hours pass without a decision, going back and forth between new and old, risk and safety. When Jonathan is back home, he shares some of all these thoughts, which helps a bit, but more than anything he wishes he could talk to Mike. He'd know what to do.

Will Byers is not cut out to be an adventurer. But he desperately wants to be.

And then the snow clears and school starts again. It is with some reluctance that Will joins in. The lessons begin slow, with both pupils and teacher struggling to remember what was done in class before all the chaos. As nice as the slow start is, it leaves Will's mind plenty of time to wander, and wander it does. He can't manage to focus on what the teacher is saying, more so for the fact that throughout the entire lesson, Mike's chair remains empty. The disappointment manifests itself like an ache in Will's stomach. He must still have a cold. But Will needs to see him, he *wants* to see him; there is so much he wants to talk about. There isn't anyone else in the class who he

could even talk to without stuttering, far less talk about something as important as this. But Mike is absent, and Will is bursting with ideas.

Recess finds him on the bench in the school yard, the one below the old oak, drawing on his sketchpad. One text passage, one image in particular is stuck in his head, maybe because he's read it so many times, and slowly, stroke by stroke, it is beginning to take shape on the page. The artist takes a lot more time with it than usual; he feels like he has to make this perfect. As such, it is a good five minutes before the squiggly lines of a waterfall are visible in the background of the scene. Another ten for the bridge over the river. Five more for the outlines of two statues flanking it - before Will takes out his eraser and starts again, unhappy with how they turned out. He can see the image of the place clearly behind his eyes, and the wish to just pour it out onto the page is overwhelming. He is so enthralled he almost misses the school bell.

English seems to pass by in a flash. Just like that, Will is back in his spot below the oak, pencil flying across the page. He doesn't hear the shouting from the basketball field or see the people running across the yard. He's in his own world, doesn't really plan his creation; it just happens. And *maybe*, when the outlines of Thorin's company begin to take shape, there's a small sixteenth figure crossing the bridge into Rivendell, right there in the middle between the dwarves. The scene couldn't be further from the white and grey schoolyard where he is sitting all by himself. As he is eventually reminded when the real world demands attention again.

The sound of laughter makes him look up. A group of older boys walk across the yard, chatting among themselves. Within one moment, the elven city and the adventurer are gone and Will quickly lowers his eyes, making himself as small as possible, with the faint hope that this time they will just pass by. But then come the sniggers, a sound that he is by now painfully familiar with, and he just knows they are directed at him. He doesn't need to look up to see the group mutter about the weird little boy with his sketchbook. It is not new. It's recess, and recess is for shouting and games, not quiet and drawing. That belongs in the classroom. Will knows that. But he still can't help it.

Mike doesn't mind Will's drawing, or his silence. But Mike isn't here,

so Will just folds in on himself and tries to be invisible. Sometimes it works.

A shadow falls on his page, sending Rivendell into darkness. Will has no choice but to look up. Two of the boys are standing over him, one tall and blonde, the other skinny and dark-haired. He doesn't know their names, but he's noticed them in class; it's pretty hard not to. But both are smiling, which makes him relax a little. And they've got the new kid in tow. He's still 'the new one' even though he came to school a few weeks back. Will has often seen him with this group, and now he is standing a few feet behind them, likewise looking down on him. Something about the two and the group they belong to seems to draw everyone to them. Will has never tried talking to them, though, because he knows he wouldn't be able to get a word out.

The blonde speaks first: "Hey – William, right? We're playing hide and seek."

As if that was his cue, the skinny one pats Will on the shoulder: "You wanna play with us?"

Do you want to be my friend?

Both are smiling. Will swallows. There shouldn't be any problem to say something in response, because it is clear what the right answer is. And the truth is, even though he only wants to keep drawing, he does like to play hide and seek, too. But he hesitates, and he can't even explain why. Maybe because the question doesn't feel right. It sounded so different from the way his friend first asked him on the playground.

His silence stretches out long enough to be an answer itself. The others feel that, too. The blonde boy's inviting smile slowly transforms into something else. With a sinking feeling, Will recognizes the bad grin he knows far too well. The boy takes a step back and elbows the new kid: "Told you. Look at this stuff; he's just gonna sit here all the time. Weirdo. Come on, let's go." With that, all three of them move away from him, back towards their group.

Before they have gone ten feet, Will is already back in his own world,

focusing hard on the lines and colours on the paper. Because he wants to, not because he doesn't want to think about *that*. Not because he fears he'd start to cry otherwise. That's probably the first lesson he learned: you can't cry here. Because if you do, they'll look at you and laugh at you, and then you'll cry more. So just don't start.

Will knew the moment he saw them smile. He doesn't understand how a smile can mean something so different. He usually likes seeing people smile. His pencil is scratching across the page, and with a glance, he notices that he's broken it. No more Middle Earth. Suddenly it's not even fun to think about anymore.

"Hey, Will!"

The sudden greeting snaps him out of his thoughts and he looks up. He's not ready for another encounter. But then he is also not ready for Mike to suddenly be standing there, out of the blue. But then he can't even think about that in the face of the grin his friend sends his way. It's halfway between *up-to-something* and apologetic: "Hey. I thought you'd be here."

His voice is still hoarse from the cold, but nowhere near as bad as a few days ago. And it's still the nicest thing Will's heard today. The awful feeling inside him dims a little; first by joy of seeing his friend, then by complete non-understanding of the same fact.

"Where were you?" he blurts out. "I..." *I missed you*. "Since when are you here?"

"I couldn't come sooner." Mike says almost apologetically. He takes another look at Will and his smile falters suddenly. A slight frown takes its place as he turns to look after the three boys: "What did they want? Did they say something?"

"Uhm, no." They didn't, really. Will already feels stupid for reacting like he did. Mike would think so, too. He doesn't want to talk about it, so he says instead: "I thought you were sick."

Mike rolls his eyes in response, the gesture so endearingly familiar that his friend can't help but smile: "Hmph. Officially. Mom thinks I should still be in bed. I had to get out."

He shrugs his shoulders, and only in that motion Will realizes that he doesn't have a backpack with him. So Mike doesn't plan on going to class. Well, he is sick, 'officially'. What he does have, however, and what Will now notices, is a little bundle under his arm. It's cradled like a small treasure, and instantly wakes Will's curiosity. "What's that?" he asks.

His friend seems to have just waited for the question. With a mysterious smile, like a magician presenting a secret magic trick, he unwraps the bundle and holds out the contents for Will to see. The boy stares at the grey cover with curiosity, then with some confusion. It seems eerily familiar.

"My mom kept me in bed for four days." Mike explains, and in his exaggerated annoyance completely misses the surprise on his friend's face. "It's ridiculous; it wasn't even a real cold. But she bought me these books so that I could have something to do. You'll love this! I was dying to talk to you about it."

"Really?" Will asks with as straight a face as he can muster, just catching himself. He's bursting with things to say of his own, but in a split-second moment, he decides to hold them back. Once he's gotten over his initial puzzlement, he finds this really funny for some reason. It is an effort not to laugh at the mysticism radiating off Mike at the moment, given the fact that Will has an identical copy of his big surprise right there in his backpack. But he manages it somehow.

"Yeah. It's like, the biggest journey you have ever seen. Look, here's just how it starts..." With a big smile, Mike opens the book on the first page and immediately starts to read, oblivious to Will silently mouthing every word as he does: "*In a hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means*" Dramatic pause: "*Comfort.*"

Will has leaned in as if to listen: "Oh, that sounds amazing! Go on."

"As you wish, mister! Ahem; *It had a perfectly round door like a porthole, painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob...*" He continues on, somehow managing to make even the basic description of

furniture sound exciting. Voice rising and falling with every paragraph; he has fully switched into story-teller mode: "*This hobbit was a very well-to-do hobbit, and his name was Baggins. The Bagginses had lived in the neighbourhood of The Hill for time out of mind, and people considered them very respectable, not only because...*" Mike finally looks up from the page for the first time and breaks off abruptly. His brow furrows in confusion: "Why are you grinning like that?"

Will gives up. He can't stay serious any longer. Shaking with silent laughter, he reaches into his backpack. His friend, completely at a loss, looks on, still with the book forlornly in his hands. Will just manages to hold up his own copy of *The Hobbit* in an overly dramatic gesture, mirroring Mike. Then he drops it, completely dissolving into giggles on the spot.

The expression on Mike's face is priceless. He's just looking back and forth between the book and his laughing friend; the excited narrator suddenly turned into a confused meerkat. Then his cheeks take on a deep red: "You...! How...? When did...?"

Will never thought he'd ever see Mike Wheeler speechless, but there it is and it's absolutely adorable. It just cracks him up all the more.

Mike catches on, finally: "You! I'm never sharing anything with you ever again, pretender!" In mock outrage, he throws his book on the bench and pretends to throttle said pretender. An attempt which quickly dissolves into both of them struggling for breath over their laughter. They probably make for a very strange sight, by all accounts.

"Sorry." Will manages once he has gathered enough breath again. A sideways glance, and the two identical books are still lying there next to them, almost mockingly. He remembers something his mother said, which he didn't understand at the time. With a sudden hiccup, he turns back to his friend: "Is this like fate?"

"Coincidence." Mike breathes. "But cool. Really cool." He shakes his head: "Wow. When did *-hic-* you get this? I thought I was the only one with the books."

"The same as you; a few days ago. I *-hic-*; sorry. I didn't have

anything to do, and Jonathan left..." Will pauses. Belatedly, his mind has caught on to one particular letter from Mike's question: "Wait, *books?*"

Mike nods enthusiastically. "Yeah; one through six. Seven, with this one, but I only read this so far. I just had to talk to you before I read on. It's incredible."

"Seven... what?!"

Mike scrunches up his brow in slight confusion: "Books, of course. The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings; the entire thing. Why? How far are you? I only read some pages of the next one."

He says that so casually. As if he hadn't just made the biggest reveal ever. His friend can only stare at him, his thoughts doing somersaults in his head. The journey isn't over. *Seven!*

The school bell rings. 'Only a few minutes left until last period', it says. Mike glances up in dismay of being interrupted. "Shit. Math is last today, right?"

Will nods mechanically, still too overwhelmed to speak.

Mike shrugs and gives a not-at-all-exaggerated cough. "Sorry, but I'm still too sick. Can't go to class." His entire expression belies that statement. And his eyes shine when he asks Will excitedly: "Can you come over later?"

Will's mind is racing. This is just cruel; holding this adventure within an inch of his fingers before snatching it away again. Of course, he could just sit through Math and then speed over to Mike's. It's only two hours. Two hours too many.

"I think last period was cancelled today!" he blurts out.

Mike raises a surprised eyebrow: "It wasn't."

Shit. Will looks at his friend pleadingly: "Let's say it was?"

For a moment, Mike continues to look at him in surprise. But then his lips curve up into that perfect Mike Wheeler smile, the one that's

somehow excited, inviting and mischievous at the same time. The one that says nothing is impossible.

"Yeah. Let's say it was."

Will almost jumps up in his excitement, forgetting that he still has his sketchbook on his lap. With a little blush creeping up his cheeks, he quickly puts it down and starts gathering everything else into his bag. He probably looks far too obviously eager to get going. That's because he is.

Meanwhile, Mike is back to his earlier excitement. He can't stand still: "Who would you be? I mean, if you could be anyone of the Company?"

What a question. Will doesn't have to think long. He pauses halfway of putting his sketch away and glances at it. Right in the middle of the bridge, the tall figure with the staff and pointy hat is already a lot more pronounced than the others.

"Gandalf."

"Hmhm. Yeah; he's awesome. Like when all the dwarves got captured and..."

"...he comes in at the last second to save them." Will completes the picture. "Yeah." That rescue was awesome, but, really, Will loved everything about the wizard. He was old and wise, but he also had humour, when he carved the sign into Bilbo's door. He didn't always have an answer to everything, but he could improvise. And despite not saying much, he could always make himself heard. And he always was a friend to the others.

His eyes meet Mike's. He can't tell whether his friend has thought the same, but Mike nods earnestly: "I think you are a good wizard. I could be Thorin, maybe. Michael-Oakenshield, leader of the company!" He throws himself into a pose, and Will, half-serious, immediately bows his head in respect. He would follow just Mike-his-friend; that's not even a question.

In their daydreaming, both of them have forgotten for a moment that

they are still in the schoolyard. Then a sudden "Hey." reminds Will abruptly of that reality. He unglues his eyes from Mike's leader pose at the same time as his friend turns around.

One of the boys from earlier has come back. It's the new kid. Will instinctively shrinks on his bench, the excited freedom suddenly gone. With unease, he notes that the boy is staring down at him with that same strange look as before. The same look as always; like Will was something utterly weird. Then Mike moves to Will's side, laying a tense hand on his shoulder. "What?" he questions the newcomer. There's a harshness to his tone now that Will hasn't heard before.

The boy doesn't seem to notice. He keeps looking at Will and starts to speak quickly: "I just wanted to ask. Is that - is that Rivendell?"

The artist's head snaps up. That's not what he expected. He looks at the boy in surprise, really looks at him for the first time. Black eyes, black skin, short hair. His hands are buried in his jeans pockets. And his expression... his look is not at all scornful or weirded out, but more – curious?

"Yeah?" he says hesitantly.

The other's eyes light up: "That looks awesome! Then that's Gandalf? You like Lord of the Rings?"

"Uh-" Will stutters. But this time it is because he doesn't have an answer for that question, not because he's afraid of saying something wrong. The other boy is studying his sketch almost with awe, and Will suddenly blushes with embarrassment when he realizes that. Engraved on the boy's face are small laughter lines. There's really nothing scary about him. Why did he think there was?

Mike is still looking at him suspiciously. Like Will, he doesn't quite know what to make of this situation. "We're just leaving. Aren't you with the cool ones? They're over there."

The boy looks over at the group Mike is pointing at, the one that was with him previously. And then back to Will and Mike. "No." he says simply.

Mike frowns: "No?"

"No. Lord of the Rings is cool." He tilts his head: "Or do you think it isn't?"

"Of course! Who wouldn't..." Mike's heated reply stops abruptly when he sees the small grin on the other's face. He's been played. Mike's face flushes. "Idiot." he mumbles, but Will knows him better. His tone says that he doesn't really mean it. Will thinks he can even hear a bit of respect. The new kid doesn't seem that bad. And he knows Gandalf. And he decided to talk to them.

Which does still feel a little strange. Mike seems to feel the same way, because he quickly motions for them to go. Will gladly follows, eager to embark on their journey, leaving their new - acquaintance? - by the benches.

"So, you're not going to Math?" his voice calls after them.

"No."

He sounds almost disappointed: "See you tomorrow, then?"

The two boys glance at each other, hesitating. But neither wants to say No, and both are a little bit curious, if they're honest. In a moment of boldness, Will turns around and gives a quick nod. "Maybe." Mike adds.

5. Upside Down

I'm sorry in advance.

.....

840

.....

It is pitch black outside by the time Will swings onto his bike and pedals off the Wheelers driveway. The wind is in his face and messes up his hair, but he is too tired to care much. And maybe a little too nervous, too. Mirkwood feels especially gloomy and ominous at this time of day. The name really fits well, Will reflects, trying to suppress a shiver as he steals glances into the darkness just a few feet off the road, at the dark outlines of the trees against the night sky. At times like these he regrets his vivid imagination. It makes it all too easy to see giant eight-legged shadows moving in there. Will breathes in deeply. Eyes on the road; it's just a forest. Nothing to be afraid of.

His bike's headlight keeps flickering, making the road ahead fade in and out of view. Will can barely see where he's going. It's the lesser of his problems: he could have found his way blindfolded by now. Still, if his mom knew he was out here at this time of night, she would probably get a heart attack.

A smile steals onto his face. Under normal circumstances he wouldn't even be here, as someone would have long ago come by the Wheelers' to pick him up. Luckily, mom and Jonathan would be away even longer than him this particular evening, and while no one had allowed Will to stay with his friends until so late an hour, they had not explicitly *forbidden* it either. Which was fortunate, since he really didn't think he could have left their party early – and potentially miss out on the great adventure Mike had planned.

"Dinner's ready!"

"Yeah. Soon, mom."

...

"Are you still up down there?!"

"Just a little longer, mom!"

Will feels a self-conscious smile tug at his lips at the memory: 'a little longer' had turned into almost two more hours, despite their best intentions. The new game his friend had come up with was such great fun that all of them - including Nancy, who was usually so particular about time - had gotten lost in the flow, and in the end only a dramatic intervention from both Mike's parents had put a stop to their adventuring.

His bike's wheels crunch over gravel and Will returns to the present. The silhouette of their house is just visible in the darkness, small and forlorn in the middle of the forest, as ever. He hadn't thought he was home already. The TV in the living room is still on; Will can see its ghostly light behind the windows. Dad must be watching one of his movies. At least he wouldn't wake him up. The boy unlocks the door, fumbling for the keyhole in the darkness, and steps inside. The familiar smell of old wood, adhesive and *home* envelops him, and he stays still for a moment to breathe it in. He never paid much attention to this, and now he wonders why. He wished he could capture this kind of feeling in a drawing.

There is no warning before what happens next. One second the boy is locking the door behind him, the next there is a noise behind him, something suddenly grabs his arms and presses him against that same door. Will's heart nearly stops in his chest. For a few seconds he is completely frozen in shock; only then does he start to struggle against the grip on his wrists, but it only tightens until he cries out and stops. *Goblin*, is his first panicked thought, still completely in the D&D world. *Burglar* the second, once the rational part of his mind prevails. Someone must have broken in. And Will caught them in the act. He picked a bad day to come home late.

It isn't a burglar. Will can barely see anything, but once his eyes adjust to the dim light in the hallway, he recognizes a familiar face just inches away from his. The relief he feels is short lived.

"Well, look who it is. Where have you been all day?"

Will flinches at the scornful tone. At the worst possible time, his tongue ties itself in knots, and the apology for his late homecoming dies on his lips. It's the darkness, and the smell. He can smell the sour stench on the breath wafting in his face, the smell that always surrounds his father when he gets *really* angry at something. Usually he calms down if left alone for a while. But right now he is expecting an answer, and he lets the boy know with a hard shove against the wood. Through the pain Will finds his voice again and twists in the grip: "You're hurting me!"

"Where!"

"Mike; just Mike! I'm sorry dad, I didn't look at the time, I'm sorry..."

To his growing confusion and alarm, his father's grip doesn't loosen one bit. He has screamed at and shaken him before when he did something wrong, but this feels like a very different kind of anger, and it is well and truly frightening Will. Lonnie is not screaming either; his voice is dangerously quiet: "Seems to me you spend an awful lot of time with that Wheely boy. Now, why is that? Are we not good enough for you anymore? Huh? Or is my *son*-" he spits out the word like it's a curse, "really such a fucking *fairy*; you can't stop cuddling for a single day, eh?!"

The disgust conveyed in Lonnie's words is clear, even though they don't make any sense to the boy in his grip. And it hurts. Because all that disgust, that anger, is clearly, inexplicably directed at him. Will can feel his eyes starting to water. He quickly forces them shut before his father can see: he hates it when Will cries. It doesn't seem to matter, because Lonnie shoves him again, harder this time, and Will realizes he's still waiting for an answer. *It's just a misunderstanding, it's not what you think...* He doesn't even know what his father thinks; what he has done wrong for him to be so angry. But he must have done *something*, or father wouldn't be like this. Wouldn't say these things. *Mike is my friend; they're my friends; it's not that I like them more than...I'm sorry.* But all that comes out is a choked "Please..."

The slap comes without warning. A searing pain explodes on Will's cheek and then the world is suddenly at an angle. The entire side of

his face is numb, his ears are ringing. He feels more than hears the disgust in his father's voice, feels it in every fibre of his body:

"I didn't wanna believe it. I've really given you the benefit of the... the...whatever." His words are starting to slur. "Such a weakling. Shit! How have bos' of you turned out this way? Can't be my genes sure as s-shit. You- you little *faggot*..."

A drop of spit lands on the floor.

Will's cheek was burning. It was hard, so hard to look up again. The tears had finally come to his eyes, unbidden, and his voice came out so weak: "Dad..."

But the face hovering inches away from his was that of a stranger. The deep-set eyes boring into him belonged to a person Will didn't know. They weren't even angry anymore; they were looking at Will like they were searching for something, and the longer the moment dragged out, they couldn't seem to find it.

Without warning, the stranger let go and Will almost fell to the floor. He slowly raised his head; afraid of what he would see in his father's eyes, but what he was met with was worse than anger. His father's expression was completely blank as he looked down at him. Finally, he spoke again, and his strangely disinterested tone made the boy flinch more than any insult: "Won't call you my son anymore, no, obviously not." His voice was clear now, not a single word slurred: "Knew that couldn't be right. You go ahead living in fantasy world or whatever. Oh, but just run to your mommy, and let her tell you 'it's alright', 'that's just who you are'. Hah! Bunch of nonsense."

With that, his father turned away. He staggered back to the couch, falling down with a heavy thud, and stared at the TV. Will stared at his father's back, unable to move, unable to comprehend: a frozen statue of a boy who only moments ago had been normal and happy, and whose image of the world had just broken into a million pieces. The man on the couch ignored him completely. Then something snapped inside him and Will ran: he rushed past the couch, into his room, closed the door, fell on his bed, buried his face in a pillow. And waited for the nightmare to be over. The TV continued to blare from the next room over, the programme moving on as if nothing had

happened. Will's cheeks were all wet and he wiped at them furiously with a pillow. He had to wake up any second now. Right? Right?!

Such a weakling.

It wasn't a dream. Somewhere beneath the shock and hurt he knew, of course he knew. But he couldn't comprehend what had just happened in any other logical way.

run to your mommy

not my son

The air in the room was suddenly suffocating. Will couldn't breathe; he had to get out. *Get out.* That thought dominated everything as he climbed over his table and cracked open the window. He didn't think. Just get out. *You're not welcome.*

Will ran; it was all he could do, all he knew how to do. Just get out. Just get away from here, it doesn't matter where to. His feet carried him past the old shack behind the house and into the woods, and after that he didn't even look anymore; it was all a blur of trees, tears and darkness. His pulse raced in his ears and it almost, almost drowned out the words that kept shouting in his head.

Faggot.

The boy ran faster. Through the blur of tears and confusion he even forgot to be scared of the dark.

Run to your mommy.

Something grabbed at his feet and within a second Will lost all sense of up and down and was tumbling over the forest floor. Pain exploded on his chin and he came to a stop on a bed of wet leaves. The earthy smell of the forest mixed with a metallic taste on his lips. Body aching, the boy kept lying there, in the position he fell. It was easier than moving, easier than thinking.

Faggot.

Of course, he couldn't stop his mind just as easily. Like it wanted to

hurt him even more, it started to replay everything that happened in the last few (minutes? hours? He didn't know). Every word, every hateful motion. After hearing it all a second time, it still didn't make any more sense.

He was late.

Father was angry.

He wasn't his father anymore.

Will desperately kept trying to arrange these points to make some kind of sense, and failed. This was where he gave up the last bit of hope that all this could be just a terrible dream. Even in his nightmares, Will could never dream this up. But if it wasn't a nightmare...

There must be something wrong with me.

It had been years since that thought had crept into his head. Back then he had been alone and scared and different. He wasn't alone anymore, hadn't been since the day on the swings. He didn't feel different anymore. He was still quiet and dreamy, but Mike had never minded, nor had his parents, and even Lucas didn't seem to think it was weird or wrong. None of them had made him feel different.

Faggot.

Wrong-different.

He wasn't! Will tried to tell himself that, repeated it to himself over and over again. He remembered the evening (was it really still the same?) he had spent with Mike, Lucas and Nancy. He remembered how happy he'd felt. He couldn't accept that being friends with them was bad. But his father had hit him – Will flinched again, feeling the hand land on his face – and he wouldn't do that without reason. No matter how hard the boy tried, he couldn't reconcile the two. It didn't make sense. Will shivered, and after a second he realized that it was from the cold. It was late October. He'd have to get back to the house soon. Or keep walking; maybe find a place to camp, far off from the words and the pain. The latter choice was very appealing.

Will didn't feel ready for either. He didn't know how long he sat there against the tree trunk, feeling very lost. If someone had happened to come by, he could have been mistaken for a part of the forest.

Mom and Jonathan would be home soon.

After a while, Will Byers got to his feet and started walking back. It felt so much farther than the way here.

In his room, he changed into his pyjamas, as he would have any other evening, and climbed into bed. The routine action brought some comfort, even if it was short-lived. But then there was nothing else to do but stare into the darkness, alone with his thoughts. The quiet now felt wrong; completely at odds with the storm inside him. Sleeping was impossible.

Eventually, he heard the click of the front door, followed by the creaks of the floorboards and the whispered voices of people trying not to wake anybody up. Will turned around, facing the wall. He didn't want his mother to see that he'd been crying. That would lead to questions and worry, and he wasn't ready for that. He just wanted to sleep and forget, at least for a while.

When the door of his room opened, it was his brother's voice that broke the silence. It was still resounding with excitement, even though he was trying his best to be quiet; the concert must have been great: "Hey there, buddy! Stop it; I know you're not asleep. Had a good time?"

Will managed to get out a muffled "Yes." into the pillow, hoping that it didn't sound as shaken as he felt.

He needn't have worried; Jonathan was far too excited to notice: "Will, these guys were amazing, you wouldn't believe it. And guess what; I've bought us their tape! Cost me a fortune, but it's impossible not to like; you have to hear it. I'm off early tomorrow; wanna have a listen after school?"

Will didn't answer, but tugged himself deeper into the pillows. Any other time Jonathan inviting him to share his grown up-music would have excited him, but now he scarcely felt anything.

Faggot.

My son.

The silence stretched for a long moment, the words bouncing around in the empty room senselessly. The excitement that had entered with Jonathan slowly died down. "Will?" His brother was slowly realizing something was off. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Will still didn't turn around. "Buddy? What's wrong?" Now Jonathan sounded seriously concerned. After a moment, when his little brother still didn't answer, he sat down on the bed, gently nudging his shoulder. "Want me to leave?"

Will still didn't turn around, but he quickly shook his head. He didn't want to talk, but he realized he also didn't want to be alone. Anything but alone again. The mattress creaked as Jonathan stretched out next to him. Will could feel the worry radiate off of him, the questions that burned on his brother's tongue. He didn't voice them, though, but just lay on the bed in silence. Will released a held breath. He began to relax a little, for the first time since he had unlocked the front door. Jonathan never pressed him into talking, not like mother and father did. But paradoxically, that often made Will *want* to talk to him; tell him things he told no one else.

Not this though. This was too much. Right now, Will was just grateful he wasn't left alone with his thoughts. His father's words still bounced around in his head, screaming for attention, and he couldn't shut them off.

"Jon?" he asked after a while. It was only a whisper, but Will knew he had heard. "What... what is 'faggot'?"

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Will could feel his brother go stiff beside him. For a second there was silence. "Nothing." Jonathan's voice sounded strangely strangled, as if it had taken all his self-control to utter that word quietly. Then he squeezed his little brother's shoulder, and it felt a lot fiercer than usual: "And definitely not you. Don't worry about it, okay? See if you get some sleep buddy. I'm right here." He wrapped his arms around Will's small frame, the way he had always done when he cried. Trying to shield him from anything bad out there.

It's bad.

Perhaps he'd always understood the way his father said it. The disgust with which he'd spit out the word. Will curled in on himself. His father had been blunt; mean, maybe, but blunt, where Jonathan was still trying to protect him. Of course there had to be a reason. The boy wanted to cry into the embrace, but his tears were all spent. Everything that had happened, what father did was all normal; he had to accept that now. The not-normal part, the problem, was him.

Faggot. Different. Wrong-different.

6. Friends Don't Lie

Okay, in advance: Thanks to anyone who's still reading this. Got a little sidetracked, but hopefully updates will come more regularly from now on.

.....

[848]

.....

"Should I stay or should I go now?"

"If I go there will be trouble..."

"If I stay it will be double!"

"Should I..."

"Mr. Byers!"

"Sorry."

Mike had to stop himself from chuckling. He threw a glance at his friend, who had turned a bashful shade of red and was looking down at his exercise book.

Under the suspicious looks of their Math teacher, the rest of the lesson took place without any more songs. Then, as soon as the bell had rung and Will had set a foot in the hallway, they were back with a vengeance. Will just randomly started humming; first as they emptied their lockers, then at lunch, then in Art; all completely without context. Mr. Clarke gave him a strange look when he started in Science, but decided not to comment on it, probably trying to determine whether his usually quiet pupil had gone mad. Not that unreasonable an assumption. It certainly was driving everyone else insane who happened to be in earshot.

Literally, everyone.

"Ok seriously, what is going on?" Lucas finally questioned Will after last period. "What's with the singing? I'm not judging, but still. Have you seen that look Jennifer gave you?"

Mike, who had not seen that look Jennifer had given Will, was just as perplexed at his friend's sudden musicality. He couldn't wrap his head around it. The Will he knew was, well, *shy* and rarely raised his voice, much less *sing in front of an entire Math class*. It was baffling. Not that Mike was complaining. "I just hope this is not contagious." he joked, nudging his friend. "It's bad enough without us joining in, too. I don't think Mr. Clarke could handle any more music."

Will smiled brightly: "*Should I stay or should I go now?*"

An exasperated groan from Lucas: "If I hear that one more time, it's me who's going."

Will paused, and for a second Mike thought he saw something flicker across his face, but a heartbeat later it was gone, so he must have imagined it. Will grinned and nudged Lucas playfully in response, who rolled his eyes, but seemed appeased. Appeased enough that by the time they got to the bike racks, he was willing to offer them to take a look at his new *X-Men* comic. Which was a big deal, since all three of them were huge nerds when it came to the X-Men.

Mike, of course, jumped at the chance. He hadn't gotten to read the newest issue yet and he was all out of pocket money, too. So what if he'd have to endure Lucas' smug grin for a week? Some things were worth making sacrifices for. He swung onto his bike, ready to pedal off with his friends.

To his surprise (and quiet disappointment) Will didn't. He shook his head, explaining that he couldn't come, since he had to help his mother clean up the house. "And I still have to write this essay for Mrs. Anderson." he added. "She'll personally kill anyone who doesn't have it this time."

"Shit!" Mike cursed. That same essay ("Ancient Rome and its colonies") was also still lurking in his backpack, about 90% unfinished. He'd chosen to forget about it until today. And judging by Lucas' muffled curse, he wasn't the only one. Bugger.

The coloured boy let out a sigh: "Well, shit. I guess we have to divide our time between comic and essay, Mike. How about I do the first and you the second?"

"Yeah, right. Dream on."

"It was worth a try."

Will grinned: "Good luck with that, guys. I'll see you tomorrow." With a wave, he jumped onto his own bike and headed his separate way. Before he was even off the parking lot, they could hear the quiet: "Should I stay..."

Lucas shook his head, looking after their friend pedalling off into the distance: "What's up with him?"

Mike grinned: "You mean the singing?"

"Yeah; that and – I don't know. He's a little – off."

"Off key, for sure." Mike chuckled. "I've never heard him sing before." Though, if he was honest, Will actually sang quite nice and even if he didn't, the perplexed face of their stern Math teacher would have been enough to make it worth it. "I wonder how that happened."

"Hmm." Lucas muttered, but didn't press the subject any further. They too pedalled off the school grounds. It wasn't a long drive: Lucas family lived closest to the school, and about halfway between Mike and Will's respective homes. On reflection, it should have probably been their designated place to hang out, but wasn't for some reason. Mike wondered why Lucas had never brought it up before. They got about half way there with only the sound of their wheels filling the road.

"Should I stay or sh – shit!"

"It is contagious!"

"I swear to God I'll sue him for this. That has to count as disturbance of the peace, right?"

Mike chuckled at his friend's drama, little knowing that, very soon,

he would be at the point of yearning for some peace and quiet himself. Because, over the course of the next hour, he got hunch of why Lucas never suggested his place for sleepovers: The reason was four feet small, constantly clinging to their heels and Never. Stopped. For Breath.

"Are you Lucas' friend?!"

"What do you have there?!"

"You play catch with me?!"

"What are you doing?!"

"Is that from *X-Men*?!"

After about 30 minutes and several futile "Shut up, Erika!"-s , Lucas finally made the executive decision to lock both of them in his room to escape the endless barrage of questions. Mike's head was swimming, so it wasn't a moment too soon. It really was a pity Will wasn't here. Mike missed him already: Will would likely have been perfectly happy to play with Lucas' little sister all day if necessary and keep her occupied. But as for Mike, he simply lacked the patience for that endeavour. And they really had some homework to finish (and a *really cool looking* comic to read).

Predictably, they ended up spending a lot more time with the comic than the essay. Mike wasn't sure if anyone could have concentrated on Caesar's conquest of Gaul when they could see Magneto battle the X-Men instead. As Lucas pointed out; their History teacher would likely not see it the same way, though, so they tried their best to cobble together at least the mandatory page and a half. It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

The instant he had written out his last sentence, Lucas jumped to his feet: "How about a Star Wars marathon?!"

Mike answered with an enthusiastic "Hell yes!" Those two magic words always made anything school related second priority. He glanced at the clock: "Will should be finished with whatever he had to do, too." Also, it was already kind of turning dark outside, and so it

wouldn't look too weird if they huddled together in front of the TV at 5 pm. Mike smiled: Will would love it especially. Ever since they'd seen *Empire* together in the cinema, he couldn't shut up about it. And Lucas now owned the DVD. And Lucas' parents apparently didn't mind them occupying their TV all evening, which was still kind of incredible to Mike.

Lucas gathered his supercom to call Will, quietly humming something that sounded like: "*So you've got to let me know...*" He stopped abruptly when he noticed Mike's amused look. "Dammit." he muttered. "Let's get him over here. He has to answer for that."

And Will – again – couldn't come, saying in explanation that he was still busy. *Click*; end of conversation.

"Aw. That sucks." Mike sighed. He frowned: He couldn't remember his friend ever missing out on a Star Wars movie. It would not be the same without him. "He really has to be up to his neck in work."

Lucas turned to Mike and raised an eyebrow: "Uhm, Mike? Did you two have a fight or something?"

That question hit Mike completely out of the blue. "No. Why would we?" he answered in surprise.

"Why else wouldn't he come? He loves Star Wars."

"Yeah – but you heard him. He's got to help his mom."

"Yes – again. He couldn't hang out *once* all week!"

"He said he was sorry! He's just got a lot to do at the moment."

Lucas crossed his arms: "And you believe that?"

Belatedly, Mike realized what his friend was suggesting. His face flushed: "Of course!"

"Hmm." Lucas repeated, sounding very sceptical. "Something is up here."

"You're imagining things. Give me that." Mike gestured for the

supercom. He pressed *send* on the same channel as before: "Will, it's us again, do you copy? Over."

Silence.

"Will, do you copy, over?" Mike waited for about thirty seconds, but again there was no answer. He frowned at the receiver: "That's weird."

Lucas had started pacing, his brow furrowed. He always did that when he thought hard about a problem. "He's been acting weird all week, if you ask me. I'm not even talking about the singing: wasn't he smiling way too often, or did I imagine that?"

Mike had noticed that too, but hadn't given it much thought. "I guess. I figured something good happened. He's allowed to be happy, isn't he?"

Lucas expression darkened: "Trust me, when you're acting like that, it's the opposite of happy." He stopped pacing and turned to Mike: "Something is bothering him, and he doesn't want to let us know it is." he concluded.

Mike frowned, trying to follow his train of thought. Lucas' analysis sounded – well, not like *Will*. Sure, they *had* gotten a lot of shit from some of the boys at school lately, and for some reason they liked to pick Will as their target, which Mike hated but couldn't do much about. But Will would tell them if it bothered him that much, wouldn't he? Will wore his heart on his sleeve; he wouldn't even lie about having done homework. In fact, Mike couldn't remember him *ever* lying about anything. And definitely not to him. The two of them were on the same page about pretty much everything, to the point where they might as well have shared a headspace. He'd know if something was up with him. Right?

But Will *had* been acting a little strange lately...

"So", Lucas continued, "we have to head over and talk some sense into him."

"Lucas, I think you're reading too much into this." Mike scratched his

head in confusion. "Anyone can have an off day."

"Well, I am going to check on him. But if you don't want to come," Lucas added, smirking, "you can stay here and babysit my little sis. She seems to like you."

"What? No, why...?" But Mike's protest found no addressee; his friend had already left the room. "Lucas! Agh; fine, I'm coming!" Mike quickly hurried after him. There was nothing wrong with surprising Will with a visit, after all.

And Lucas was probably just paranoid.

The gravel crunched under his wheels and Will jumped off his bike. He felt utterly drained. At least it was Thursday, so he would only have to face school one more day.

Humming the last notes of his song, he walked up to the front door. An involuntary shiver ran through him: a part of him always expected something awful to happen now when he opened it. He hated this feeling. Home used to be a safe space, a place to retreat to when the boys at school were particularly mean to him. It wasn't anymore. And more often than not, Will felt like that was his fault.

With an effort, he pulled himself together and let himself in.

Before he could even drop off his backpack, Lonnie appeared in the hallway and spied Will at the doorstep. He was still wearing his clothes from work; he was home early. Will managed not to flinch. Just. Not even as Lonnie walked up to him and gave him a welcoming clap on the shoulder: "Hey there, kiddo. How was school?"

Will tried his best not to look at his feet: "Okay."

"Nice. They don't bother you with homework?"

"Ahm – no, it's not that much."

"That's the spirit!" Lonnie was giving him a smile, and Will still didn't know how to react to that. He wished he could just forget about the other version of Lonnie, then he might have been able to smile back.

Instead, everything was weird. And in those moments, it *definitely* felt like it was his fault.

Lonnie didn't seem to notice his hesitation, though; he was speaking on: "Hey, you haven't got anything planned for tomorrow, right? The Hoosiers are playing the Bulls. I've saved us two seats, right by the field."

"Uhm..."

"Come on; you've loved those games since you were little."

Luckily, Will was spared a reply by his mother rushing out of the kitchen. He had to suppress a sigh of relief. Joyce had recently started wearing her hair in a bun, but over the course of the week it had gotten increasingly dishevelled; a picture of barely controlled chaos that made Will crack a small smile. She had mittens on, and judging by the smell she brought with her, she had just finished cooking. But when she saw the two of them, she stopped dead, her gaze flicking back and forth between Will and Lonnie. Still, she conjured up a smile: "Hey, sweetie. How was school?"

Will managed a nod. "Great. We, uh, had a project in Science. It was fun."

Even to him it sounded hollow. A new cluster of worry lines appeared on Joyce's brow, and Will cringed internally. He loved his mom, but she cared for him so much and more than anything else he wished that he wouldn't give her cause for worry all the time. It felt like that was always the case.

"Will? Is everything alright?"

Lonnie answered in his stead, visibly annoyed: "Jesus, stop asking him that. He's not made of glass. I was just asking if he wanted to watch baseball."

Any trace of a smile vanished from his mother's face when she turned to him. Her voice was icy: "He doesn't, Lonnie."

"Huh. You seem to be pretty sure of that."

"Yes, because, unlike you, I..." His mother stopped herself, looked at Will and gave a strained smile: "Sweetie. Why don't you get on your homework?"

Will nodded, all but fleeing out of the room. His eyes were stinging again, and he didn't want either of them to see. When he reached his bedroom, his parents' voices were already getting louder. Will quickly closed the door behind him. It muffled the argument on the other side, but couldn't quite shut it out. With a tiny sob, he fell onto his bed.

He didn't know how he'd gotten through this week. In between coming home to shouting and arguing and having to remember how to smile when he was with his friends, he'd sometimes felt like he'd snap in two.

And it was hard. Sometimes Mike would smile at him or Lucas would make a joke, and suddenly all he wanted to do was start to cry and tell them about what was going on; at home and in his head.

Yes, really mature, Will. Why don't you go directly back to the kindergarten, while you're at it? The mocking voice in his head sounded like Lonnie.

Will buried his head deeper into the pillow.

So far, he'd kept it together. Somehow. He'd never lied to his friends before, and he hated it; hated pretending. It felt like he was betraying them. But he couldn't tell them, he just couldn't. Because the moments with his friends were the only times where he still felt welcome anywhere. He couldn't lose that. He needed that to stay normal.

Was he really a freak? Not really belonging here? Will had often felt that way, especially in school, where almost nobody would even talk to him. Or when he would sit and draw while everyone else rushed to play outside. He just never knew why, until Lonnie shouted it at him in the dark.

But afterwards his mom had hugged him and said No; he was perfect the way he was, he was absolutely not a freak. But Lonnie had

claimed he was – and it hadn't been the alcohol talking, even though he claimed it had. But Jonathan said, Fuck what Lonnie thought; what did he know?

Will didn't know what to think. But he was afraid of what his friends would say. He wouldn't be able to handle it if they would turn away from him, too.

Outside, his parents were getting louder.

"What is your problem now, huh?" That was Lonnie.

"My problem?! After what you did? You have some nerve..."

Should I stay or should I go?

Will couldn't thank Jonathan enough for his mixtape. Ignoring the shouting as best he could, he reached for the cassette where it lay on his bedside table. He liked the songs. He really liked them. But more importantly, when he just wanted to drown out the world, like now, it helped to focus on the lyrics. Maybe that was why they got so stuck in his head.

Will turned on the boom box and focused on the first notes of the song. Quiet notes, barely loud enough to understand. With Lonnie right in the next room, he didn't dare turn it any louder. When his brother was home, Will could flee into the music freely, let it drown out the shouting, but not now. Jonathan didn't care that Lonnie hated 'that noise'; when Will wanted to listen, he'd turn it on at full blast if necessary. Will didn't have that kind of courage.

It had to be enough to hum along quietly, let the singer's voice fill his head. *Should I stay or should I go?* It was like a shield made of music. It protected him.

"And will you stop trying to drag him there?! He doesn't like that sport, can't you understand that?"

"That's the point! Don't you see what he's doing all day? Nose stuck in those books half the time, and the other he's scribbling this nonsense! I won't have my son doing this - queer stuff!"

Darling you got to let me know... Only the song was important; the rest was just background noise.

"Oh! So now he's your son again, is he?!"

"Fuck, will you let that go? I told you I was stone drunk."

"Hah! Maybe you even believe that yourself, Lonnie, but I know damn well..."

So you got to let me know...

"What? What are you going to do, huh?"

Should I stay or should I go?

"You don't understand a fucking thing...!"

Will buried his head deeper into the pillow.

Should I stay or should I go now?

Should I stay or should I go now?

If I go, there will be trouble

And if I stay it will be double.

Eventually the song ended and the last guitar riff played out in Will's head. After lying still for a while, he dared to sit up again and removed the pillow. The fighting had stopped. For now. Will knew it wouldn't last.

Maybe he should just run away. That would make everyone's life easier.

His supercom crackled to life. Lucas' voice came through, distorted with interference: "Will. Come in, Will"

Hesitantly, Will took up the device and pressed the *send* button. "I copy. Over."

"Hey. We're done with that stupid essay and we've got time to spare.

You interested in a little Star Wars marathon? Uhm; Over!" Lucas added belatedly.

Those two magic words almost had Will saying *Yes, of course I'll come!* But just as quickly, his tiredness caught up with him and he swallowed the words. After this long week, after that latest argument his parents had over him, he just wasn't ready to meet Lucas again. Or Mike.

"Sorry Lucas, I'm still busy here. Maybe tomorrow. Over and Out."

Maybe tomorrow. Maybe this will all sort itself out soon. Maybe.

As much as it hurt, he couldn't face his friends until he felt he could look them in the eye without feeling like a liar. But until then there was nothing left to do but throw the com on the desk, throw himself back on the bed and feel thoroughly miserable.

He didn't know how long he lay there, staring at the ceiling. But eventually, a noise ripped him out of his thoughts. It sounded like someone was knocking. He ignored it. Maybe his mother would open. But the knocking persisted stubbornly. It took Will a while to realize that it was not coming from the front door. When he finally looked up and glanced at his window, he nearly fell off the bed.

Mike and Lucas were outside, the former knocking on the glass insistently. They're hair was all tousled from the wind; they must have biked here. Lucas gestured at the window and mouthed "Open up."

Will was so surprised that he simply complied and walked over to them. A wave of cold November air hit him as he opened the window. It cleared his head so far that he could start panicking about them being here. But before he could do anything else, Lucas leaned in, grinning at him: "Hello there; nice to see you, Byers. Were you sitting on your ears?"

Will threw a hasty glance over his shoulder. The house was quiet. "What are you doing here?"

"What does it look like?" Without further preamble, Lucas climbed

over the window sill. After a short hesitation, Mike followed. Will had to step back to let them in. His room wasn't large, and with three boys inside, it was getting crowded.

Lucas reached into his backpack and took out a DVD. It said *The Empire Strikes Back* on the front in cursive writing. He grinned proudly: "If the Byers won't come to Star Wars, we bring Star Wars to Byers; it's that simple." He frowned as something occurred to him: "That is, if you've got something where we can play it."

Will thought of the TV in the next room, the one Lonnie usually occupied. "Uhm..."

"Come on." Mike cut in. "It's the least you can do after giving us an earworm of that god-awful song. Lucas has been humming it all afternoon. You owe us."

"And then I'll decide if I forgive you." Lucas added crossly.

"It's not an awful song!" Will protested. He might be a complete mess, but he wouldn't hear a word said against Jonathan's taste in music.

"Whatever. The point still stands: you owe us." Lucas glanced around the room (which looked as messy as always, and not the least bit cleaned up, as Will now noticed). "And you can't have been too busy." he added casually.

Shit.

"Uhm, I- I didn't get to that yet." Will stammered.

Judging by Lucas' raised eyebrow, he didn't sound very convincing. But what made Will really feel uncomfortable was the strange look that Mike was giving him now. His friend looked almost uncertain, something Will was not used to seeing in him. He was fidgeting. "Uh, Will? Sorry, that sounds stupid, but – you're okay, right?"

Will stared at him, trying to get his mouth to work and say something in response. Mike never asked those kinds of questions – he had never needed to. And what should Will say now? *Yes, everything is totally fine. No problems whatsoever. Star Wars sounds super. Let's go.*

"What- uhm- why do you ask?" he managed.

Mike looked at his feet, seeming just as lost for words.

Luckily/Unluckily, Lucas had no problem with coming straight to the point: "You are kind of avoiding us, you know. Like, all week. What happened?"

There it was. Will averted his eyes; he felt horrible. And he couldn't bring himself to lie. "A lot." he whispered.

Mike made to take a step towards Will, then wobbled on his heels as if he wasn't sure what to do with himself. He looked extremely upset: "Is it about school? Why didn't you say something?"

Will felt himself tear up again. He looked up to meet his friends' eyes: "I couldn't."

Mike took a deep breath: "Did I – did I do something wrong? At least tell me so I can fix it. Please."

"What? No, No; you didn't do anything!" Will said, aghast. How could Mike even think that?

No, how could Will *make* him think that?! He looked at his friend; really looked at him for the first time. Saw his anxious look, his nervous, twisting fingers, his chocolate brown eyes shining with concern. Will wanted to hit himself. This was his friend. They told each other everything. Why hadn't he told him?

Mike spoke up again: "Then why..."

"It's my fault!" Will burst out. Before either Mike or Lucas could interject, he hastily continued: "My – dad is angry with me and everything is weird because of me, and I just wanted it to be normal, but it's not and I'm sorry that I lied and it was too much so I didn't tell you and that was wrong and – I'm sorry."

A stunned silence followed. Mike and Lucas could only stare at him, not knowing what to make of all that. Will didn't know what else to say, either. But he felt strangely elated. At least he had said something and couldn't hide anymore, for better or for worse.

Finally, Lucas cleared his throat: "Ahm. Will, listen. We..."

Whatever sermon he had prepared, he never got to get it off. It would have been hard to understand anyway – over Lonnie's shouting that re-commenced outside:

"You fucking don't care about a faggot in the house. 'No; it's all perfect, it's all fine, my son is perfect the way he is.' Jesus. You know what? Those kids at school are already talking; and they talk to their parents. I get looks at work. 'Hey, that's the daddy of that queer kid.' But okay, have it your way: Go on; he'll be a full on fucking fairy by the time you're done..."

Will's elation was gone in an instant. He wanted to sink into the ground. Lonnie was throwing around slurs now, seemingly without caring whether Will heard or not. But he heard, loud and clear, and so did his friends. Will didn't dare look at them. He had a pretty clear idea of what they were thinking. He braced for the imminent questions. Or the disgust.

"Should we go?"

Will's head shot up, to stare at Mike. Mike met his eyes, resolutely ignoring Lonnie's shouting. But he didn't look angry or confused. Will's stomach did a little leap. Then what he had said reached Will with a delay. It had sounded like a serious question, but there was just the tiniest hint of a twinkle in Mike's expression. And it somehow turned the entire situation upside down.

Suddenly, Will felt a small laugh escape his mouth. He didn't know where it came from. Maybe it was the casualness with which his friend suddenly started quoting his favourite song back at him. Maybe it was the prospect of actually getting out; escaping all this. Or maybe it was the fact that Mike said 'we'. That he didn't push him away. Whatever it was; suddenly Will could breathe again; it was as if a heavy weight had lifted off his chest.

"Yes." he managed. "Please."

"Mirkwood?" Lucas suggested, throwing a disdainful glare at the wall behind which Lonnie was still shouting. "Nice and quiet by

comparison."

Will nodded fervently. Nice and quiet sounded good. And not alone. That sounded even better. Mind made up, Will pushed past Mike to open the window again. He didn't bother taking anything with him. Mike smiled at him as he swung his legs outside and that was all Will needed for the moment. He climbed out after him, followed by Lucas, who closed the window behind him, muffling the noise.

They grabbed their bikes (his friends had already grabbed Will's from the porch). Lucas gave him a nudge: "You lead, Will the Wise."

"Thanks." He started to drive off the lawn. "So, Mirkwood. Where to then?"

Mike caught up to him: "Hey; it's been a while since we've had a sleepover. What do you say; my basement, popcorn, Star Wars?"

"I'm in." Lucas said.

"Sounds perfect." Will replied. He loved sleepovers at Mike's home. *And, well* – He cast one look back at the house, where his parents were still fighting.

It wasn't like anyone would notice he was gone.

7. Tiny Little Emergency

Tiny Little Emergency

Code Red.

It was an early morning in spring 1980, and Hawkins was the same town as ever, which was to say; sleepy. The townspeople prided themselves of being normal, which was to say; boring. Nothing ever really happened here, and that was fine by most. Shop owners were pulling up their shutters, children reluctantly started on their way to school and the occasional Department of Energy van drove through the streets. All routine that never really changed much.

Except this morning, the peace was disturbed by three bicycles that zoomed past the surprised residents. The boys riding them were in a hurry. They were not complying with road traffic regulations in the slightest and rounded corners dangerously fast. Had a police car chanced to show up, it would have likely pulled them over. As mentioned, though, this was Hawkins. So the chances of that were rather slim. And besides, it *was* an emergency. Or so they'd been told.

"What is even going on?!" Dustin shouted against the wind. His bike was bringing up the rear, and Will could barely understand him. He imagined that even those few words must have been a huge effort to get out. They'd been driving at full speed all the way from the other side of town, and they all were ever so slightly out of breath.

"What did you say?!" Lucas called back, slowing down for their friend to catch up.

"Phew! I said; what happened? We didn't have a Code Red in forever."

"How the hell should I know? Mike didn't say any more to me than he did to you."

"It has to be serious." Will breathed. As much as his legs burned, he wished they could go faster. It had been roughly 20 minutes since

they'd gotten the distress call, and it felt like an eternity. Will had never heard Mike this upset, and he wondered with dread what could possibly have happened since yesterday evening. Everything had been fine then. "He sounded panicked."

"Yeah, not like him." Dustin agreed, having finally fully caught up.

"You think someone is injured?" Lucas asked worriedly.

"I hope not." Will muttered.

"It's not going to be that serious." Dustin tried to calm everyone down while simultaneously trying to keep breathing. "Remember, the last Code Red was only..."

"Left here!"

"Phew!"

600 meters further down the road, they finally reached their destination. The ugly grey and white clinker of Hawkins Hospital jutted out of the trees like a giant brick that someone had dropped in the landscape and then forgotten about. Will's stomach twisted at the sight. The last time he'd been here, he'd twisted an ankle so badly he couldn't walk straight for a month. And he'd seen plenty worse cases with his neighbours. If Mike called them here – Will stopped his train of thought right there. It didn't help his nerves.

They jumped off their bikes and hastily deposited them somewhere next to the entrance. The hospital probably had rules against that, but none of them really cared at the moment. They ran past two elderly men on crutches, who frowned after them disapprovingly, and entered the foyer.

Will's first thought was that the hospital didn't look any more appealing on the inside than on the outside. The room had about the size of a classroom at Hawkins Middle and was almost completely empty, save for a lone clerk behind his desk who looked to be fast asleep. Then Will's eyes ignored all that and zeroed in on Mike, and he breathed a sigh of relief, because his friend didn't look injured. But he didn't exactly look alright, either. Mike was pacing up and down

the entire length of the room, chewing on his fingernails. Back and forth, back and forth. It was like watching a caged lion – a rather cute, exceptionally nervous lion, but still.

Then Mike noticed them and relief spread over his face. "Guys! I'm so glad you're here."

"Sure we are. You called, we came." Dustin stated with a (toothless) grin. It didn't quite mask his nervousness, but in that short moment they had all made the unspoken agreement to keep calm for Mike. They joined him and gathered for council, a little ways off from the snoring clerk. Dustin produced a ration of his emergency chocolate and handed it to Mike first, because he clearly needed it. His hands were shaking. He was acting more nervous than Will had ever seen him.

Dustin's chocolate did its job, though. Mike chewed carefully, calming down a little. "Thanks. I thought I'd go crazy here."

"Uhm, yeah." Lucas replied, carefully approaching the subject. "What's going on, Mike?" he asked what they were all thinking.

The reaction was as immediate as it was unexpected. Will watched in fascination as Mike's face turned an interesting shade of scarlet. He almost looked – embarrassed? This was new; Mike never looked embarrassed. Well, except when his sister called him names; then he could get a little angry. But this was different. His friend kept locking and unlocking his fingers in a constant nervous motion. His fingernails were all chewed off. His eyes darted everywhere except their faces. He looked like he was about to break into a panic.

Lucas must have been seeing that coming, too. He snapped his fingers in front of Mike's face: "Mike? Hello? Calm down, man. What's wrong?"

Finally Mike managed: "Mom is upstairs."

An icy lump settled in Will's stomach. *Mrs Wheeler*. He reached for his friend's arm: "Is she – hurt?"

Mike glanced at him distractedly: "What? No. I mean; yes. Maybe. I

don't know." He tried to chew on his nails again, but since there was nothing left of them he ended up just sucking on the fingers.

His three friends exchanged confused and worried glances.

"Okay, Mike, you need to sit down." Dustin took control of the situation. He manoeuvred their beside-himself friend to the nearest bench and handed him the chocolate again. "Here. Eat this. Calm down. Deep breaths."

It seemed to work, slightly.

"Okay." Lucas tried to start again, after their friend had lost his manic look. "First things first: is anyone injured?"

"No." Mike shook his head.

"Okay, so; that's good."

Mike nodded, though he still didn't look 'good' as Will was looking at him. Well, Mike never looked *bad* –but that didn't matter now. Ignoring that strange thought, Will sat down next to his friend. "Can we do anything to help?"

"Uh. Yes. I just called you because – I needed support."

"You've got it." Dustin and Lucas said as one. Will squeezed Mike's arm reassuringly. It didn't really matter what they promised support for at the moment. When one of their Party needed help, that was second priority.

Mike took a deep breath. He opened his mouth: "Mmomshavnbbby."

He received three even more confused looks.

"Uhm, sorry; what?" Dustin scratched his head in confusion.

Mike glared at him, as if angry for being forced to repeat himself. "Mom is having her – my – her..."

Will's mind came to a stand-still. "*Baby?*" he asked incredulously. He thought he'd heard wrong.

"Yes." Mike squeaked, his voice an octave higher than normal.

"What – baby?" Dustin was caught completely off guard, which did not happen often.

"Yes."

"Oh." Lucas mouthed.

Will's mind was racing. Of course they knew that Mike was getting a little sibling. Mrs Wheeler hadn't been around a lot lately. But still; this came slightly out of nowhere.

It took a while, but Lucas' brain finally managed to make sense of the situation. "But why – wait – *the baby* is the emergency?!"

"Yes!" Mike looked like he was on the verge of another panic attack.

The group exchanged shocked glances. That was not what they had been prepared for. At all. Broken limbs or angry sisters/mothers/fathers; that had all happened before; that was a viable Code Red. But childbirth? Will pictured a mini-version of Mike running around the Wheelers' house, and a grin stole on his face. It didn't sound that bad.

Then Dustin stepped forward and hit Mike, right in the shoulder.

Mike jolted back: "Ow! What was that for?!"

"Dude!" Dustin was waving the remaining chocolate in his face, brandishing it like a weapon. "A baby! You called. Code. Red. For. A freaking. Baby!" Every word was accompanied by a stab to Mike's chest with the chocolate bar.

Mike flushed a deep crimson again. "It is a Code Red! This is fucking scary, man!"

Will giggled in a mix of relief and excitement. *It's not an emergency. It's just a new Wheeler.* For Mike, though, it seemed to be closer to the actual end of the world. Will laughed involuntarily. He probably shouldn't. But it was just so bizarre seeing their Paladin panic about something as sweet as this. And when Mike turned to look at him,

incredulous that Will was laughing, and he still had that shocked look about him, Will had to press both hands to his mouth to stop from laughing out loud.

"This isn't funny!"

Behind Mike's back, though, Lucas begged to differ. He was shaking with silent laughter, tears forming in his eyes. At least he had the good grace not to guffaw loud enough to fill the entire lobby. That was Dustin's job. His laugh could have woken the dead. Then Lucas lost it. At that point, Will gave up on trying to hold back, too.

They laughed loud enough that the clerk startled awake behind his desk. He looked around in a daze, then zeroed in on them as the source of the disturbance and frowned. He left it at a reprimanding frown, though. Will guessed he didn't have hordes of laughing boys in here that often. The thought only made him laugh all the more.

"Guys!" Mike protested weakly, in vain.

Lucas finally collected himself sufficiently to place a hand on Mike's shoulder in reassurance – a gesture which was undercut only a little bit by the fact that he was still chuckling. "Don't worry. We will help you with your – *ahem* – 'emergency'."

"Of course we will." Dustin said. "Emotional support is my speciality."

"It's not the end of the world, Mike." added Will, who felt that his friend actually needed to be told that. "Not all younger siblings are as bad as Lucas'."

"Hey!" Lucas protested immediately; predictably. He might complain about his little sister every chance he got, but woe betide anyone else who dared say something bad against her.

"I hate you all." Mike complained. "I thought you'd help me out here! This is not helping."

Lucas grinned from ear to ear. "Aw, sorry for hurting your feelings. But man. We're having a baby!"

"Nonono; we are not having a baby!"

But everyone was already tripping over themselves with excitement, ignoring Mike's protest.

"What is it?" Dustin inquired eagerly. "Boy? Girl?"

"I haven't exactly checked." Mike replied sourly.

"Pray to God it's not a sister." Lucas advised gloomily. "That can only end badly."

"Hey; that's so not true." Will chided him. He couldn't stop smiling. His imagination was already tripping over itself with possibilities. His eyes found Mike's: "We'll have to show her the swings."

A reluctant smile stole onto Mike's face. Maybe he was seeing the same image behind his eyes as Will. He certainly didn't look *that* abhorred by the idea of a sibling anymore. "Yeah. That would be fun."

Dustin froze, then clapped his hands in excitement: "Oh my God. We'll have a new D&D member!"

Lucas grinned: "I could teach him how to ride a bike."

"Or how to get on Nancy's nerves." Mike mused.

The 'emergency' was soon forgotten. Now everyone was adding their ideas what to do with the newest Wheeler, each more crazy than the last. They couldn't stop. Even Mike was suddenly on a high; like the idea of having a *younger* sister/brother to mess with was now the best thing ever.

Somewhere above them, that sibling had likely no idea that his/her childhood was already being planned out by a council of very excited, very unqualified boys in a hospital foyer.

They lost track of time, but at some point a nurse entered the room. She called out: "Mike Wheeler?"

The called jumped up like he'd been electrocuted: "Yes?!"

The nurse smiled: "I think your little sister wants to see you."

The room had a sterile feel to it. Maybe that should be expected from a hospital, but it still struck Will as a strange environment to give new life. There was only one bed and one chair. The walls were clean white without any pictures; the bedside table empty save for a single night light. A mess of blankets and newspaper had been draped over the chair, which in its messiness looked strange in this orderly place. The air smelled of sweat and window cleaner. All that, Will's mind took in in a couple of seconds, down to the smallest insignificant detail. Probably because he was too high-strung to immediately focus on the center of attention.

Mrs Wheeler lay in the bed, looking exhausted. Her hair, normally as neat and tidy as anything, was completely dishevelled. When the boys entered, she could only muster one tired smile for them. She had dark rings under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept all night – which, it dawned on Will, she probably hadn't. Only the pillows she was propped up against seemed to hold her up. Maybe that was why you had to go to the hospital for childbirth. Mrs Wheeler looked like she might fall asleep at any second.

But curled to her chest was a tiny pink bundle. And it was moving. After a long hesitation, the boys stepped closer. All except for Mike, that was, who had re-frozen in the doorway. It took Lucas and Dustin to drag him forward.

The baby was the size of Will's lower arm. What little he could see of its face showed a million wrinkles, and only a tiny tuft of blonde hair. The baby looked so tiny and fragile that Will hesitated to even look at it. But Mike's mother was smiling proudly. "Isn't she beautiful?" she said.

Will couldn't help but agree. Mike's little sister was sleeping. One tiny hand was curled into the blanket, the other lying on her chest. The baby sucked on her thumb in her sleep. Will felt a rush of queasiness when he thought that he must have looked like that too, once.

"Wow." Mike breathed.

"She's already got more teeth than Dustin." Lucas commented.

"Fuck off, dude!"

"Hey! Language! She's just a few hours old!"

"Sorry, Mrs Wheeler."

Looking at Mike now, his little sister was evidently the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He looked absolutely entranced.

"What's - what's her name?" he asked.

Mrs Wheeler smiled a tired smile: "Holly."

The baby opened her eyes at the name. They were of a clear blue, like a cloudless sky, and full of surprise. She looked at the new people in her world curiously, settling on her brother after a moment. Mike stepped closer, still in trance.

"Can I – hold her?" he squeaked.

"Careful, honey."

Mike took her gingerly, like he was holding something breakable. He looked somewhere between awe-struck and terrified. Then baby Holly cooed, and all at once his fear disappeared and Mike broke into a giddy laugh. He started to tickle her small tummy.

It was a beautiful picture of sibling bonding – at least until Lucas leaned into frame and stage-whispered: "Code Red!"

Mike flushed beet red. "Shut up." He looked like he wanted to send a glare at his friend, but that quickly melted into another smile when Holly caught one of his fingers and started examining it in fascination, like an interesting new toy. He wiggled it around, to excited babbling from her part. Then he looked up at his friends sheepishly. "It's- uhm- I think it's not that bad."

"Really?!"

"Told you so."

"Can we hold her, too?" Dustin added.

Mike nodded hesitantly, though he still looked a little miffed about their making fun of him. He glanced at his mother, who gave her okay. "Be careful." Mike echoed as he handed the little bundle over to Dustin, who grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Heyy, little one. I'm your uncle Dusty." He smiled at Mike: "She's much more charming than you."

Mike snorted. "If you say so."

"Can we all be her uncles?" Will wanted to know.

"Hmm." Mike pretended to consider. A devious smile stole onto his face: "I might allow it, *if* you all apologize for laughing. *And* if I get first shot at the arcade from now on."

From the bed, his mother cleared her throat loudly. Despite her weariness, she could still sound extremely stern if she wanted to: "Mike Wheeler, for the time being, I'm in charge of who becomes whose uncle here. And I won't have any trades with my daughter. Is that understood?" Her exhaustion seemed to make Mrs Wheeler a lot more to-the-point than she normally was.

Mike smiled ruefully: "Sorry. Won't happen again. Yeah, Will; I'm sure she won't mind..."

"Whaaaahaaaa!"

Mike never got to finish his sentence. Without warning, from one second to the next, little Holly was bawling her eyes out.

Mrs Wheeler wearily sank a little deeper into the cushions in response. She looked like she didn't experience this for the first time. Dustin, his face bright red, turned to her bed helplessly: "I'm sorry; that - what do I..."

"Rock her." Mrs Wheeler sighed, demonstrating the motion.

Dustin did as instructed, but if anything the crying only got louder.

"Shut it off!" Lucas whimpered, covering his ears. But that was easier said than done. It wasn't like any of them had experience with babies.

This called for parental intervention. As quickly as he dared, Dustin handed the bundle over to Will, to pass it back to Mrs Wheeler.

Being so suddenly given a baby, Will was starting to understand Mike's earlier panic. He had no idea what to do with the kicking bundle he was suddenly holding. He tried the rocking, while simultaneously moving to hand her back to her mother.

"Weheha – ha?"

From one second to the next, Holly went still. The crying stopped just as abruptly as it had started. Will stiffened, unsure what to make of that. The baby stared up at him with her big blue eyes. And didn't make a sound. Maybe she was confused about all the people passing her around.

Will glanced at Mrs Wheeler uncertainly. "Is that good? I didn't do anything. She – ouch!"

Now Holly had discovered *his* finger as her new toy, and promptly gave it an experimental twist. She giggled at his pained yelp and apparently felt prompted to ease the pain by sucking on his fingernail.

Will looked around helplessly: "Uhm..."

Lucas was visibly trying not to laugh. "You make for a good pacifier, Will." he commented, clearly enjoying this.

Mike had watched the entire thing with a raised eyebrow: "Well, I know who of you guys I'm gonna hire as babysitter."

Will blushed up to the roots of his hair. "I don't know what I'm doing..." he started to clarify, but was interrupted by Holly cooing and reaching for him with her stubby little hands, demanding attention.

"Thanks for making me look like an awful human being, Will." Dustin complained. But he was looking at the two of them with a kind of grudging respect.

"Alright, alright." Mrs Wheeler's voice came from the bed, sounding

barely awake. "Will: Uncle Number 1. Whatever you're doing, keep it up for a few more hours, yeah, honey?" Her head already started to dip. In five seconds flat, she was gone completely.

The group exchanged glances. Dustin summed it up best: "Well. This is a mess."

Will wasn't sure he wanted to spend the next few hours as a human pacifier. But at the moment, little Holly wasn't exactly leaving him a choice. He looked imploringly to Mike: "Take turns?"

His friend shrugged: "I guess." He took Holly from Will and glared pointedly at Dustin: "Nobody break her."

The scolded huffed: "Pfff. Will only had beginners luck. She just doesn't know me yet. Just wait; in a few months, I'll be her favourite uncle, and you'll all wish..."

"Wha...? When – what time is it?" a sleepy voice interrupted from the back of the room.

Startled, everyone turned to the only other chair. There, a hospital magazine began to move and slowly revealed a stretched out Ted Wheeler, who apparently had somehow managed to sleep through the entire birth and following commotion. He blinked into the room: "Hey, boys; you're all here. Did I miss something?"

Once again, Will had to admire Mike. He was really good at this straight-face thing. "Not much." he replied innocently, holding out his (excitedly babbling) little sister.

Thanks for reading. For the record; I really enjoyed writing something light-hearted again.

I think I've got ideas for about three chapters left, so let me know what you think: any advice/criticism is welcome.

8. Alone

Alone

The light bulb was glowing blindingly bright.

Will Byers had to look away, shield his eyes against the light – and against the *thing* standing underneath it; that nightmare that his mind couldn't fully comprehend. In the very same second, he realized that looking away from *it* was a mistake. This was unlike like his usual nightmares; in a flash of panicked clarity he knew that looking away or pinching himself wouldn't just make it disappear. He had to...

He didn't have the time to do anything.

A high-pitched chitter reached his ears and then the chill swept over him. Ice cold, it washed away every semblance of feeling, wrenched away every attempt at action from Will. It crept into every fiber of his body, and it was as if he were paralyzed. Even just opening his eyes again was impossible. Behind his eyelids, the light was burning brighter and brighter. He screamed.

And then the light was gone. Will gasped sharply, as feeling rushed back into his body.

The first thing his mind registered was the biting cold. His bones felt like ice. Then the damp. Cool moisture settled on his skin. *It's October*, his mind protested, *the night shouldn't be this cool yet*.

We played D&D. I rolled a seven. The Demogorgon got me. I was driving home...

Its face opened up.

Will ripped his eyes open.

And clasped both hands over his mouth to stifle his scream.

The thing was with him in the shed. It now faced away from him, standing so close that Will could have reached out and touched it.

The scream kept fighting to escape from his mouth, but if it did he knew he would be dead, so Will bit it down with all his might. He tasted iron on his tongue. The small non-panicking part of his consciousness slowly registered that it wasn't attacking him yet. It was just there; still as a statue. As if it was waiting for something.

Will took a small, slow step backwards. His hands were empty. The gun he had picked up and loaded was gone; he had no memory if he even fired it, and in this moment it hardly mattered. All he knew was that he had to get out of here. Without the creature noticing. Somehow. Will had to force his legs to move, his wide eyes locked on the pale, scarred back of the creature. What if that turned into a giant mouth, too? Didn't it just twitch? It took everything in him not to just bolt for the exit.

Miraculously, the old wood didn't make a sound – not even a creak – as he cracked open the door. Somewhere in the back of his mind he registered that it looked old and rotten, and it left a sticky substance on his fingers. He cast a look back. The monster still hadn't moved.

With two quick steps he was outside, still not daring to breathe. He resisted the urge to slam the door shut behind him. The night was darker and colder than before, but he couldn't care about that, either. His state of mind only allowed the most basic input: *Get away. Slowly. Quietly. For God's sake; don't make a sound.* One foot moved in front of the other, until he'd reached the edge of the trees. Then his pent up fear finally broke through and burst out in a sharp, loud gasp. In his ears it rang like a gunshot. His eyes flicked back to the shed, but nothing was moving.

Monster.

There was no thought behind what he did next. He'd just seen a monster. And it attacked him. Every logic demanded that he ran for someone who could help; the police if possible. But Will couldn't think that clearly. His mind was stuck on *monster*. Blind to anything other than his next two steps, he took off into the woods; running deeper inside as fast as he could.

Run. Get away.

He saw a familiar shape between the trees.

Again, there was no logical thought. Will hurried towards the shape, pulled the rooted blanket covering the entrance aside and climbed inside the tiny wooden hut. He collapsed onto the floor, breathing heavily. *Safe.*

Castle Byers had always been his protection against the monsters, ever since he and his brother built it. Only friends could come in here. He was safe.

It was a straw to clutch at and on some level Will was aware of that, but he had nothing else. He lay down amidst the pillows and blankets, and waited for the nightmare to be over.

An endless time later, he thought he heard something moving outside the fort, and he felt his breathing stop for a second time. His body went rigid like a statue, refusing to make even the slightest of movements. Nightmare or no, his fear was very real. There was a strange noise; like an animal's chitter. Then silence.

Will started to breathe again. He couldn't even begin to comprehend what was out there, or how his sleepy mind could have come up with it; and it terrified him more than anything else ever had. He buried deeper into the blankets like a butterfly in a cocoon, willing himself to fall asleep – and hopefully wake up safe at home. His limbs felt heavy, like he'd just run a marathon; and right now that was good. He could already feel his conscious starting to slip.

The last thought in his head before he drifted off was that usually, in all the other nightmares, he could never reach Castle Byers. Why in this one?

Somehow he must have actually fallen asleep (could you really fall asleep in a nightmare?), because the next thing Will felt was him lying sprawled amidst the blankets, with something gooey clinging to his cheek. For one hopeful second he imagined he was just waking up in his bed and had drooled in his sleep. When he opened his eyes, he would be at home, with the smell of his brother cooking breakfast wafting through the door and another normal school day ahead of him.

Then the chill returned, and he was not lying on his bed, and his lungs were filled with something that wasn't the cold night air of Hawkins; and he was afraid to open his eyes.

When he did, it at first didn't seem to make any difference. The world was still black. Had home always smelled this foul? Had it always been so dark? This still felt like the nightmare.

Will shut his eyes once again and pinched himself. "I'm awake." he said aloud. It came out throaty and hoarse. There was bile at the back of his throat. He swallowed thickly, suppressing the urge to vomit. No; this definitely couldn't be a dream. It felt too real. He counted to three, then opened his eyes and tried to see through the darkness a second time.

Slowly, as his eyes adjusted, the silhouettes of round logs emerged from the gloom. Will slowly sat up, throwing off the blankets. He was still in Castle Byers. The chill was still there, too; as became evident when a shiver went through him, rattling his teeth.

When he'd gathered his courage and stepped outside, the world around him was a dark tint of blue and black. The sun hadn't risen yet, or so Will thought until he looked up and realized he couldn't see the sky at all. The trees were still there in their place, just like Castle Byers; but they were bare; leafless, and covered in the same substance as everything else. *It's like a shadow world*, Will thought, almost eerily calmly. *I'm in a shadow world*.

He wasn't a little child anymore. Well; right now he was scared like one; but, really, he had never been brave in his life. When Troy and his friends marched up to them in the yard and threw slurs at his face, he looked at his feet and took it; because he was a coward. Running away from problems was his specialty. Denying them; he excelled at that, too.

But at some point he couldn't just chalk this up to being a nightmare anymore. Not when every logic – no; this wasn't logical; this was just pure survival instinct – demanded otherwise. All this around him was surreal; like a fantasy; but he was very much awake. His senses told him so. *Listen to your senses*, Mr. Clark taught them. Which meant that this was real. He was really in this dark and slimy place – and so was

the monster from the shed.

His stack of pencils and drawing paper was still lying on the table; covered in slime and dust like nobody had used them in ages. Will took up some with the least amount of grime covering it and started to put down the image that wouldn't leave his mind.

The monster began to take shape; stroke by stroke. He'd only seen it clearly for a split second, but that had been enough to permanently imprint itself in his memory. And drawing was the one thing he was good at. When Will put down the pencil and looked at it, the realization that this couldn't be a nightmare only deepened: even asleep, his brain could never come up with something as twisted as the thing staring back at him from the page.

It's still out there.

I have to get out of here.

How?

A sound from outside made him jump.

Somehow, the shadow woods seemed more menacing the second time he stepped outside. Something had changed; Will could feel it even though none of his senses could confirm the impression. The blue tint to everything seemed to have grown more intense, and it was unsettling: it distorted the trails that he'd run through so many times, to the point that when Will spun around his own axis, he couldn't tell which direction he'd come from; where their house was. He couldn't see further than a couple of meters, beyond which the small rest of light didn't reflect anymore. A shiver went up his spine. He was reminded of the first and only time he'd been on stage for a school play, when the stage lights had fallen on him and he'd forgotten everything he was meant to do; looking to all the world like a deer in the headlights. He'd hated that feeling; the eyes of everyone on him and seeing every part of him while he couldn't see past the blinding lights.

This, right now, was the same feeling, except even more terrifying. Because at least in the school theatre he had known what lay beyond

his tiny field of vision; where the stage ended and the rows of waiting people began. Here, anything could hide in the shadows watching him, and being laughed at seemed like a ridiculous thing to be frightened of all of a sudden.

Will was only too aware that he was scaring himself with these kinds of thoughts. He forced himself to normalize his ragged breathing. If he started to jump at every shadow, he would never even get out of this forest.

Then one of the shadows moved up ahead.

Will froze in place as the monster crept into the clearing. It moved slowly, smoothly, measuring every step like a cat stalking a mouse.

Whatever hope Will might have had left that it had all been a bad dream dissolved on the spot, because the thing looked almost exactly like he'd drawn it. Except even more terrifying. And it was just a couple of meters away.

It was a nightmare come to life. Its body seemed to have been drained of all color: a grey head rested on a grey torso, adjoined to a pair of ghostly pale limbs. The arms were inhumanly long, ending in long, sharp claws. But the most frightening part was the head. There were no ears, no eyes; no anything that resembled a face. Just gnarled skin, folded in on itself to open up into a giant mouth, as Will knew.

The boy's heart was beating in his throat, so loudly that he was sure the monster must hear it. *Demogorgon*, he thought. Somehow, the monster from their game had actually come for him.

Its head was turning from side to side, like it was sniffing the air with a nose that wasn't there. And it was coming closer. Inch by inch, it moved towards Castle Byers and its terrified inhabitant.

In his panic, Will was suddenly hyper aware of everything around him. The slimy cold of the castle logs pressing into his back. The leaves and vines cracking underneath the Demogorgon's feet. And the drawing of the monster that he was still clutching like his life depended on it. A hopeless, crazy thought flashed through his mind

and he crumpled the paper in his hands. Loudly.

The Demogorgon's head snapped around to him.

Will the Wise casts Decoy.

He threw the paper as far away as he could. It landed in a heap of rotted leaves, maybe 15 meters to his right. A heartbeat later, the leaves went flying as the Demogorgon tore into the heap, ripping everything to shreds, but Will wasn't around to see it; he was running with all he had in the opposite direction.

It took all his willpower not to look over his shoulder. He couldn't afford to. The muddy ground beneath him was treacherous enough in the gloom even when he put all his attention to it. Where was the street? The woods he'd grown up in were completely unrecognizable, and he could only hope that he was running in the right direction. And that that – Demogorgon – hadn't already figured out the trick.

Soon, his sides started to ache. He had to slow down. The gloom didn't recede when he got closer to the edge of the forest; no sunlight breaking through anywhere. It was as if a thick blanket had been thrown over the world, barely letting in any light. The air was filled with tiny floating objects, almost like snow. But whereas snow would have settled on the trees or on his clothing, these things seemed to dance around him. Almost as if they were alive.

Will remembered what Mr. Clark had once said about radioactive pollution. Was this what it looked like? His Science teacher had added that it was unlikely to ever happen in Indiana, but clearly *something* must have happened. Something terrible. Will couldn't understand it. He had just been on his way home, and everything had been normal. And what had happened to his friends?

The thought made him stop abruptly. Why was he only thinking of them now? Were they now erring through this twisted place just like he was? That image brought a fresh rush of adrenaline. In an emergency, the party had to be together; alone they were lost. He had to find them. Will took in a deep breath of polluted air and started to run once again.

When finally the outline of a house appeared between the trees, he almost cried with relief. He was breathing heavily from the exertion, but his steps quickened until he reached the front porch. He didn't know who lived here and he didn't dare shout for help, not with the monster still somewhere behind him, so he knocked on the door as quietly as he could, hoping that someone in there was awake.

The door fell off his hinges at the lightest touch, hitting the floor with a loud *thud*.

Will stood in the doorway, paralyzed. The inside of the house, what little he could see in the darkness, was just as rotten and decayed as Castle Byers. Nobody came out of the gloom to answer the door. No human, at least. Instead, from somewhere in the woods, a high pitched chittering rose in answer to the noise. It sounded almost like laughter.

Will ran.

Three desolate streets and an immeasurable amount of time later, Will Byers was getting increasingly desperate.

He had found the Sinclair's house just as abandoned and lifeless as the first. There was no sign of Lucas, or his parents, nor even his noisy little sister. There was nobody anywhere. His friend was just gone; his bike and wrist rocket lying abandoned in the garage like forgotten toys. Seeing that was almost worse than having no sign of him at all.

Perhaps everyone had been evacuated, Will told himself. He had to believe that; the other possibilities were too horrible to imagine.

He discovered Lucas' supercom underneath the bed, where he usually put it. He tried to signal all their secret frequencies, but without getting an answer. There was just static.

The pollution had to be blocking the signal. That's what it was.

He moved on, further into the town. Every house he passed was in the same desolate state: The mayor's spacious mansion; its iron gates

hanging off their hinges like broken wings. Mr. Clark's little home squeezed in between the grocery store and the cinema; with no music drifting out the windows. High Street with all its stores; their shutters either pulled down or ripped out and lying in the streets. With every one of them he passed and every minute without another human being anywhere, the lump of bile and panic in Will's throat grew and grew, until he was struggling to breathe.

When he stumbled past a row of electricity pylons onto a neatly kept little lawn, Will almost didn't register where his feet had taken him.

The Wheeler's house stood out a shadow against the black sky; its windows broken and the glass crunching beneath Will's feet. He entered through the basement door and looked around. The TV was still there; so was the ancient couch sitting opposite it. He could see the VHS of *The Empire Strikes Back* lying right there; exactly where they'd left it after the last sleepover. It was so normal and *real* that Will almost cried.

For a moment, he forgot about the strange world out there, and the monster chasing him. The familiarity of the room enveloped him like a cocoon, wrapping him up tightly in its warmth. *"You're so cheesy sometimes, Will."* Mike's voice echoed in his head in response, and for the first time since opening his eyes, Will laughed. He could practically see his friend laughing with him as he came down the basement steps, carrying a bag of popcorn for their long movie night. Mike glanced up at him standing by the couch and smiled brightly. It was still just as hopelessly crooked as when they were in kindergarten. And just like then, Will had no choice but to smile back.

For a second, the image was real enough to touch. Then the chill crept back into his skin, and the steps were crawling with vines; the couch rotting and moldy. Will blinked and Mike was gone. Never there in the first place. The room was just as empty as the rest of the world. Will's smile faltered; slipped off his lips and fell, shattering into a million pieces on the floor. Mike wasn't here. He was completely alone.

Of course he's not here; it must be deep in the night; Mike is sleeping already. You idiot, Byers.

The slimy steps gave a sickening slurping noise as he went up. They grabbed at his shoes, trying to yank them off his feet and letting go only reluctantly. Will kept moving as if in a trance. A hopeful part of his mind tugged him forward, towards the promise of a friendly face and some comfort. The rational part already knew what he would find when he reached the top.

Still, when he stepped into the bare, empty room, it was as if his last support had been abruptly kicked out from underneath him. Nothing. No one. Empty. *I'm alone*. Every ounce of energy seemed to drain from his body. Will collapsed onto the bed and cried. There wasn't anyone around to see, so he wasn't even ashamed.

Everything Mike owned was still there in its usual chaos. Everything was there, except the one thing that mattered. He *should* be here, Will's heart insisted. He could practically hear Mrs. Wheeler shout for him to come down; breakfast was ready.

It was not until his friend's instantly recognizable sleepy-annoyed "Coming!" sounded in answer that Will realized he could *actually* hear them.

"Mike?!" Will jolted off the bed, looking around wildly. "Mike! Where are you?!"

"You look like you got trampled Mike." Nancy's voice said from somewhere in the hallway. Will's head snapped around to the sound. He was definitely not imaging it. He tripped over his feet in his haste to follow.

"It was a long night, we had fun. What's your excuse? Were you pining after Steeevie again?"

"I'm not – *pinning*! It's called studying."

"Sure."

"You're such an idiot."

"Mike, I'm right here!" Will screamed again. They were both *right there*; why didn't they listen to him?! Their voices sounded oddly distant, as if he was hearing them through a pipe. And more

importantly; they weren't here. Will ran up and down the staircase, following the echoes, but he couldn't see Mike or his sister anywhere. And they didn't react to his shouting. As if *he* wasn't here.

"Mike..." Will trailed off, his voice getting lost in the silence.

"Mike?"

"Hm? Sorry, mum. I just thought – never mind. I'm coming."

Shadow Dimension. Occupying the same space as our world, yet only running parallel to it. Can only be accessed by shadow walk.

Will's thoughts were racing; the jumbled puzzle pieces finally connecting and starting to make sense. They couldn't hear him. He could hear them. The bright light. The alien yet familiar world outside, mirroring Hawkins in its own dark and twisted manner.

The monster hadn't transformed his world; somehow, it must have transported him into its own. He was trapped in a shadow dimension. An actual shadow dimension. Will felt dizzy. Was his body still there, in the shed? If not, would Jonathan and his mother miss him already? Were they looking for him?

Irrelevant questions, chastised a voice in his head that sounded like Lucas. *Focus on the here and now. This is important.*

Yeah; how do we get out? added Dustin's characteristic lisped, optimistic tone. *Come on guys; there's always a way.*

"Portal." Will answered, aloud. It had to be; the monster had to have come from somewhere. This was simply a task in a game; like the party traversing a dangerous map with a hard to reach exit to the next stage hidden somewhere. He had to find that place, and then he could get back. "I can get back!" Will proclaimed, trying to make it sound less small than he felt. It still sounded unconvinced to his ears. This wasn't really D&D and he was just a kid; he didn't really have any magic. All he was good for was running and hiding.

What do you think, Will? said Mike right beside him, his image squeezing Will's shoulder in encouragement. In the damp shadows, it radiated warmth. *We've been in worse situations before, haven't we?*

You've survived worse. Now off your arse and let's do this!

Will took a deep breath and got up. The real Mike was probably biking to school right now. If Will didn't show up there, he would be worried. They'd all be. And his mother – she was already worrying about him all the time; he couldn't do this to her on top of everything. He owed it to them to get out.

There was a high-pitched, now very familiar noise. Will looked through the window and saw the shadow creeping towards the house.

Don't panic, he told himself; more or less successfully. He trailed his eyes across Mike's room, then snatched up two handfuls of toys and stepped back to the window. And prepared for another decoy. Hopefully that trick would work a second time, and long enough for him to get away.

Come on, Will the Wise, whispered a voice in his head – his own; and oddly encouraging. *Shoot your cabbages. Hide. And run.*

Just don't stop.

I finally got to updating this again (*victory fanfare!*). Thanks to everyone who's still sticking around, or any newcomers. I've kinda turned these coming chapters into a self-exercise for writing different kinds of atmosphere - I think it's pretty obvious what this one is meant to be. Let me know if it works or if it feels off. My goal here is to improve, after all.

(And to everyone who might be waiting for an *Easy to Love* update; it's in the works; don't throw cabbages at me!)